

## Tragedy is Not the End

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# Tragedy is Not the End

by [Hobbsy3](#)

## Summary

When Sizhui, Jingyi, and Zizhen are captured with Jin Ling at the Guanyin Temple, they're sure that Hanguang Jun and Wei Wuxian will fix everything - until Su She stabs Lan Wangji through the stomach, and everything falls apart around them. In a last, frantic attempt to undo the damage Jin Guangyao has done, Wei Wuxian activates a deadly array to send the four juniors back in time, sending them to the morning of Jin Ling's one-month celebration. With the fate of everyone and everything they love in their hands, Sizhui, Jin Ling, Zizhen and Jingyi race to prevent the ambush at Qiongqi Pass and the subsequent fallout, but Jin Guangyao has returned from the future as well, and he has no intention of letting what he wants fall through his hands a second time.

## Notes

This story begins during the Guanyin Temple scene before Lan Xichen gets his spiritual power back, but assumes that Sizhui, Jingyi and Zizhen have been there for as long as Jin Ling has. Since they don't have 'Nephew of Jin Guangyao Privilege' they've been tied to each other to keep them out of the way, but they haven't otherwise influenced any events in the temple. It should hopefully be clear enough within the text, but just in case :)

This is my first fic on AO3 and my first Untamed Fanfic - as a disclaimer my knowledge of Chinese language is very basic. I've tried to be as accurate and consistent as I can in the use of things like titles but please do let me know if there's anything I can improve.

UPDATE: This fic now has translations into Spanish on AO3 courtesy of the wonderful UchihaSakuraa, a [Russian](#) translation courtesy of the wonderful PGaer and [Portuguese](#) thanks to the lovely Lunamioneginny! The Portuguese translation is now complete :)

This fic also has a Cold Read Podfic in progress courtesy of LiangYuLian <3

- Translation into Español available: [La tragedia no es el final](#) by [UchihaSakuraa](#)

# Chapter 1

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

If he lived to be a thousand years old, Sizhui would never forget the sounds of the sword sinking into Hanguang Jun's stomach. The metal tearing through flesh, his *father's* flesh, the dull thud of the hilt smacking into his skin – the shocked, choking gasp that ripped from his father's throat.

Other sounds came next, almost as gut-wrenching, nearly as terrible – Wei Wuxian's desperate scream, Lan Xichen's wail – but it was that awful, choking gasp that rang in Sizhui's ears, that drained the blood from his face and stopped his heart in his chest.

Sizhui didn't hear his own scream, though he felt it tear out of his throat, and he felt he ropes around him cut painfully against his chest as he strained against them even before he knew he was moving. He heard Zizhen hiss in pain, felt Jingyi grapple for his hand, but Sizhui couldn't care, he couldn't *breathe*, and he threw himself further forward.

*"Hanguang Jun!"* he cried, and his father's eyes flickered toward him, his brow furrowing –

And then Su She stepped back, and wrenched the sword out, and Hanguang Jun's eyes widened, the pain in them so bright Sizhui knew that everyone could see it, everyone could see the fear laid bare in his father's eyes –

But then Hanguang Jun's eyelids fluttered, his gaze losing focus, and he slumped back against Wei Wuxian's chest.

"Lan Zhan!" Wei Wuxian sobbed, his voice frantic and shaking and broken. "No, no – Lan Zhan, Lan Zhan, stay with me, stay with me, please, *please!*"

Tears flooded Sizhui's vision until he could barely see Wei Wuxian struggling to hold his father up with hands that were still bound. He could make out Lan Xichen, blurred into a pale blue shadow as he bunched his sleeves up against the wound, sleeves that bloomed red as Hanguang Jun's blood soaked into them. But somehow Sizhui could still see his father's face, almost clearly – it was tight with pain, and though his eyelids still fluttered it looked like they were more closed than open.

Hanguang Jun opened his mouth, and all that came out was blood.

"Baba!" Sizhui hadn't called his father that in years, not in public, but it was the only word that could make its way out of his throat, and he sobbed it over and over, unable to stop the plea tumbling from his lips. Jingyi's hand clutched his tightly. "Baba, Baba, *Baba!*"

Hanguang Jun's eyes opened again, fixing on Sizhui – or trying to. They were glazed, unfocused, and when he spoke his voice was a cracked whisper that Sizhui could hardly catch. "A-Yuan..." His gaze flickered up to Wei Wuxian, and Sizhui saw it again, the way his

father's eyes softened every time they landed on the other man. Even now, Hanguang Jun's gaze softened for Wei Wuxian. "Wei... Ying..."

"Lan Zhan," Wei Wuxian whispered, and Sizhui could see that he was trembling. "Lan Zhan, please, please hold on, just hold on, please, just – don't, don't leave me – please. Please don't leave me!"

But a grimace took over Hanguang Jun's face, and he stiffened, and his eyes closed.

"*Lan Zhan!*"

Beside him, Lan Xichen sobbed, and it was a sound Sizhui hadn't realised his uncle could make, a sound so anguished and raw and afraid that it couldn't possibly come from Zewu Jun, but it had. "Wangji... Wangji, please..."

Hanguang Jun's mouth cracked open, but no words came out, and another line of blood trickled down his chin. Sizhui whimpered. Pressed against his side, Jingyi choked out a sob, squeezing his hand tighter.

"Su She," whispered Jin Guangyao, his voice ringing with horror that almost sounded genuine. "What have you done?"

"He - he was *whistling*," Su She stuttered, but when Sizhui looked at him the man's lip was still curled in the shadow of a sneer, and a wave of anger rose in Sizhui's chest. "Wei Wuxian – I was aiming for Wei Wuxian!"

Wei Wuxian let out a broken howl, shaking his head slightly and pulling at Hanguang Jun's robes. "Lan Zhan, Lan Zhan wake up, wake up, don't – please, Lan Zhan, please, please!"

But Hanguang Jun's eyes were closed, and he showed no sign of hearing, and even with Lan Xichen's robes soaking up most of the blood it still spilled across the ground, seeping towards Sizhui.

Jin Guangyao shook his head slowly, taking a step back. His eyes were wide, shining with the same horror he'd put into his voice, and flickering between Lan Xichen and Hanguang Jun.

As if feeling his gaze, Lan Xichen looked up, his face as stark white as mourning robes. "Please," he begged, voice rasping and cracking. "Please, A-Yao – if being sworn brothers ever meant *anything* to you, please – please!" He held out a trembling hand, and Sizhui couldn't understand, he didn't know how –

Jin Guangyao hesitated, his eyes glazing over as though he was lost in thought.

"Please," Lan Xichen sobbed, wearing his fear and his grief so plain on his face Sizhui burnt with guilt for not looking away. "Please – whatever you want, I'll – please... Wangji – *please*."

Something hardened in Jin Guangyao's jaw, and his eyes grew a fraction wider, as though he had come to some realisation. He flicked his wrist, a small bottle appearing in his hand.

Sizhui's heart skipped a beat. Medicine – it had to be – which meant that his uncle thought there was a chance –

“Su She,” said Jin Guangyao, and Lan Xichen flinched. Su She hurried to his master's side, head bowed, and Jin Guangyao whispered quickly to him. Then, he spoke two words, louder than the others. “Go – now.”

Su She bowed low, backing out of the temple so fast he was almost running, and for a moment Sizhui watched him go with rage churning like acid in his gut. But anger didn't come naturally to Sizhui. Even as a dozen more guards poured inside, the moment Su She disappeared a wave of terror drowned his rage, and Sizhui looked back towards his father.

And so did Jin Guangyao. With a small smile, he stepped closer to Hanguang Jun, but Wei Wuxian's head snapped up, and he bared his teeth.

“Back off!” he spat, his entire body trembling violently. “I swear, if you touch him I'll rip out your throat with my teeth, I –”

“So you do not want my help?” said Jin Guangyao softly, his face twisted as if in concern, twirling the little bottle through his fingertips. “You do not want Wangji to live?”

“Wei-gongzi,” Lan Xichen begged, and Sizhui held his breath.

Drawing in a sharp breath, Wei Wuxian flinched, and bowed his head, tears running freely down his cheeks. Jin Guangyao smiled, crouching down beside Hanguang Jun and blocking him from Sizhui's view, and Sizhui couldn't breathe. He could feel the heat of tears on his cheeks, and the rope still biting into him, and Jingyi's hand, clutching his so tight it hurt.

There was a pause, an achingly long pause that could have been minutes or hours, and then Lan Xichen let out a quiet cry. “A-Yao –”

“I think that's enough,” said Jin Guangyao, rising to his feet. Sizhui craned his neck to see around the man's legs, and his stomach churned.

“Unlock my core,” Lan Xichen pleaded. “I can give him more, he, he needs more energy –”

“To recover, yes,” said Jin Guangyao, nodding slowly. “He does. But for now, he will not die. Not today. Not if everyone in this building does *exactly* as I say.” He paused, a sad smile tugging at his lips. “I'm sorry, Er-ge. Healing him outright is not a risk I can take, even if I was capable of it.”

“You –” snapped Jiang-zongzhu, and Sizhui jumped violently. He'd forgotten that Jiang Wanyin and Nie Huaisang were there too – he had even forgotten about Jin Ling. Jin Ling, who he, Jingyi, and Zizhen had followed into this whole mess. Sizhui had forgotten all of them.

The other guards hadn't. The moment that the Clan Leader had spoken, one of them had put his sword against Jin Ling's throat. It looked so wrong – a Jin guard in traditional dress,

holding a sword to the neck of his own young master, to the heir of his sect – and even Sizhui could see the fear behind the anger in Jiang-zongzhu's eyes.

Vaguely, Sizhui heard the trundle of wheels outside, the sound of footsteps, and then Su She charged back through the door. His face was flushed, but there was a slight grin on his face as he rushed to Jin Guangyao's side, and Sizhui's anger burnt.

"It is done, zongzhu," Su She said, bowing, and Jin Guangyao nodded his head.

"Good." He glanced over his shoulder, to the coffin that held the body of Nie Mingjue, his face contorted bitterly. Then he turned back, and nodded. "We don't have much time. You know what to do."

Su She nodded, pointing his sword at Jiang-zongzhu and Jin Ling, then at Nie-zongzhu. "Get up. Now." Then he strode across the room towards Sizhui, and raised his sword.

"What are you doing?" snapped Jiang-zongzhu, stepping forward, but the guards blocked his way with their swords, and Sizhui couldn't help but cringe as Su She's sword came down between him and Jingyi. It tore through the ropes binding them, and then Su She stepped back.

"Get up," he ordered.

Sizhui felt Jingyi and Zizhen scramble to obey, and he rose too, but as he did his eyes fell on his father, and without so much as a thought he stumbled towards him. With a frightened gasp, Jingyi pulled at his hand, and Zizhen grabbed his arm, but all Sizhui could see was his father on the ground and –

"*Su She!*" Jiang-zongzhu yelled, and Sizhui looked down.

The tip of Su She's sword was pressed against his chest. A small stain of blood bloomed across the white of his robes, but it wasn't Sizhui's – it was his father's, his father's blood weeping from that sword, soaking into Sizhui's robes, and it felt like the air in his lungs had turned to snow.

"Step back now," said Su She dangerously, and Zizhen yanked Sizhui back even as Jingyi stepped in front of him, still clutching his hand tightly. Deliberately, Jingyi took a step back, forcing Sizhui to do the same. Su She smirked, and the anger in Sizhui surged so hot he almost stepped forward again, but Jingyi was unmoveable in front of him, and Zizhen had a grip like iron on his arm.

"Go and stand with the others," said Su She, and Sizhui let his friends pull him towards Jin Ling, Jiang Wanyin, and Nie Huaisang – away from his father. As they approached, Jin Ling swallowed, leaning forward as though he was about to say something, but then he faltered, and looked down at his toes instead. "Outside – all of you. Leave your swords."

A gasp hitched in Sizhui's throat, and he shook his head. "Hanguang Jun –"

Lan Xichen looked sharply at Sizhui, and the blood on his chest, and he swallowed. “Sizhui, go,” he murmured. “Please...”

Zizhen’s grip on his arm tightened, and Sizhui bit down hard on his lip, and followed Jingyi through the door.

Outside, the night was bleeding into dawn, and there was a wooden wagon in the courtyard. It was rough and worn, and looked strangely plain besides the gold robes of the Jin guards. The door hung open, and inside it was dark, and empty, but Sizhui could make out spells painted onto the outer wagon, in almost the same shade as the wood. They glistened slightly, as though the paint was still wet.

“Get in,” said Su She, nodding at the wagon.

“You –” Jiang-zongzhu growled, but Su She raised his sword and the clan leader ground his teeth together, wrapping his arm around Jin Ling’s shoulders and guiding him up into the wagon.

Nie-zongzhu clambered in behind them without a word. His face was ashen, and his eyes glazed over, as though he wasn’t really there at all, and when Jiang Wanyin grabbed him by the shoulder and shoved him into the back of the wagon, he didn’t even blink.

When Jingyi, Sizhui, and Zizhen clambered inside, Jiang-zongzhu grabbed them too, bundling them into the corner with Jin Ling. It wasn’t easy – there wasn’t enough room to stand without bowing your head, and the wagon was not big. Sizhui found himself sandwiched between Jingyi and Zizhen again, pressed so tightly together it was almost as though they were still bound. Jin Ling was wedged between the corner and Zizhen’s other side, and Nie Huaisang had already sunk to the floor beside Jingyi, his head hanging low.

Back bowed beneath the low ceiling, Jiang Wanyin pivoted slightly, planting himself firmly between them and Su She, but Sizhui could see around the clan leader’s legs. He could still see the man who had stabbed his father.

Leaning back, Su She pulled a rag from his pocket and began to wipe the blood from his sword. He did it slowly, almost reverently, and a smirk spread across his face. Sizhui’s breath caught in his throat, and his hands balled into fists at his side. From the hiss that came from Jingyi, his friend had seen the smirk too.

“Well,” he said, and though his voice was trembling there was a bite to it more vicious than Sizhui had ever heard before. “I already knew you were a coward and a traitor, but no one told me you were an ass as well!”

Su She’s face darkened, and he took a step forward, but Jiang-zongzhu shifted, blocking Jingyi fully from the other man’s view.

Jingyi opened his mouth, but Sizhui squeezed his hand, shaking his head.

“Don’t,” he whispered, but it escaped as more of a whimper. “Jingyi, please!”

Jingyi glanced at him, and then nodded. Sizhui could see his lip trembling slightly, and there were tears welling in his eyes – tears Jingyi was refusing to let fall.

“Zongzhu,” said Su She, and Sizhui peered around Jiang Wanyin’s legs.

His heart stopped.

Approaching the wagon were Wei Wuxian and Lan Xichen, and they were carrying his father between them, both cradling him as though they could not bear to let him go. Their heads were bowed, almost touching over Hanguang Jun, and though he could see his father’s chest, Sizhui could not see if it was moving, he couldn’t see if – it didn’t look like –

“Baba,” the whisper fell from his lips before he could stop it.

They didn’t even pause at the entrance of the wagon, instead clambering inside with surprising grace, considering they were carrying Hanguang Jun between them. Jiang-zongzhu pressed himself against the wall to make room, and Sizhui saw Jin Guangyao standing at the entrance, staring mainly at Lan Xichen, with what looked like pity.

“As long as everyone here is quiet, and calm, and makes no attempt to leave, we will all arrive at our destination in one piece,” he said, his eyes roaming slowly to Jiang Wanyin. “I hope you will all remember that if you make trouble, or disobey, I will have no choice but to kill you all.”

The door closed, shutting out most of the light, and Sizhui heard a bolt slide into place.

Slowly, carefully, Wei Wuxian lowered himself onto the floor, cradling Hanguang Jun’s head in his lap, and Lan Xichen sat beside him, clinging to his brother’s hand with eyes like glass. Choking back a sob, Sizhui threw himself under Jiang Wanyin’s arm to fall at his father’s side, grabbing his other hand –

And it was cold.

He couldn’t hold back the whimper that broke from his throat, and Sizhui pushed his trembling fingers to his father’s wrist. For a moment, he could only feel his own shaking, but then, faintly, he felt it – the echo of a pulse. It was shallow, so heart-stoppingly shallow, but it was there, and beneath it he could feel the faintest hum of spiritual energy.

The sword had gone through his father’s gut. A faint hum of spiritual energy could never be enough.

Closing his eyes, Sizhui concentrated, trying to pour his own spiritual energy into his father, but a hand closed around his wrist and he jolted, looking up sharply at Jiang Wanyin.

The man’s face, so often contorted in anger or disgust or just disapproval, was slack, almost scarily so. He looked tired, and his eyes were so heavy with grief that Sizhui had to glance at the corner to make sure that Jin Ling was still there. He was – shivering, and silently crying, but alive and awake and alert enough to be watching – and so Sizhui turned his eyes back to Jiang Wanyin.



“It won’t work,” the clan leader said softly. “Your core is still blocked. There’s nothing you can do. Not right now.”

Sizhui felt his lip trembling, and he shook his head slightly. “I – I – there has to be something, there has to be something!”

“Sizhui,” breathed Lan Xichen, grief and defeat heavy in his tone.

Gasping out a sob, Sizhui closed his eyes, bringing his father’s hand up to his chest and hugging it close. If Lan Xichen was telling him to stop, then Jiang-zongzhu was right.

His father was dying, and there was nothing he could do.

With a great, juddering jolt, the wagon jerked into motion, and he heard Jiang Wanyin, Zizhen, and Jingyi sit quickly to avoid tumbling onto Hanguang Jun. There wasn’t much space, and someone’s knee dug painfully into Sizhui’s thigh. He guessed it was Jiang-zongzhu, positioned half in-between and half behind Sizhui and Wei Wuxian. He couldn’t bring himself to care.

He hugged his father’s hand closer to him, covering it with his own to try and make it warmer, to try and pretend that he was helping. As he did, he curled his fingers around Hanguang Jun’s wrist, settling only when he could feel his father’s pulse again.

It was so, so shallow.

He felt tears well beneath his eyelids, and he shook his head slightly, bringing his knees up to his chest. Concentrating on his father’s heartbeat.

“What...” Jingyi whispered. “What do we do now?”

“Nothing,” said Wei Wuxian, and Sizhui squeezed his eyes shut tighter. “We do nothing.”

“But –”

“Nothing,” repeated Lan Xichen.

Silence fell over them, or near silence. Someone was sniffing, crying quietly to themselves. Zizhen or Jin Ling, perhaps, or maybe it was even Sizhui himself. He wasn’t sure.

After a while, he felt Jiang-zongzhu shift, heard him murmuring quietly.

“Don’t cry, A-Ling... don’t cry, now. Little fool. You’ll drown us all...”

“Jiujiu...” Jin Ling’s voice sounded so small. Vaguely, Sizhui remembered the look on Jin Ling’s face when Su She’s torn robes revealed the aftermath of the hundred holes curse, the horror in his friend’s eyes as he realised that his Xiao-shushu had instigated the death of his father.

“Don’t cry,” Jiang Wanyin said again. “Are you hurt?”

Jin Ling hesitated, and when he spoke again his voice sounded even smaller. “They... they took my sword...”

Sizhui swallowed as Jiang-zongzhu hissed. He knew what that sword was to Jin Ling. They all did.

“I swear, I’ll break every bone in his body...”

“No,” said Wei Wuxian suddenly, desperately, his voice cracking. “Jiang Cheng –”

“I won’t make trouble,” Jiang Wanyin growled bitterly. “But as soon as I get the chance, I’m breaking every bone in his body.”

“There is no chance...” Wei Wuxian whispered. “It’s over. He’s won, Jiang Cheng. He’s won.”

“What about the Ghost Gen- Wen-xiansheng?” Zizhen suggested weakly. “He – he might save us!”

Sizhui opened his eyes, in time to see Wei Wuxian shake his head. “They have the amulet,” he said hopelessly. “And a flute. Wen Ning is strong – they can’t control him forever, but... but it’s enough to... I don’t even know where he is. He was supposed to be outside. He was supposed to stop anyone else from coming in.”

The silence returned.

Sizhui took a deep breath, closing his eyes again. He knew he should try to keep calm, maybe even to meditate, but he couldn’t.

All he could think about was his father. The small, soft smiles he usually saved for Sizhui. The way he would listen so intently to anything that Sizhui had to say, no matter how trivial it was, how he never pushed for Sizhui to say more than he wanted to. The way he could still seem to tell whatever it was Sizhui was feeling, how he still took him down to see the rabbits whenever he was upset or worried.

How it felt when his father hugged him. It was always in private, but he always held Sizhui so close, and there was nothing in the world that made him feel safer.

But now –

Fear crushed tighter around his heart and his lungs, a python around his chest, and he adjusted his grip on his father’s wrist. He remembered his father teaching him how to take a pulse, when he returned from a Night Hunt covered in blood and scared a seven-year-old Sizhui half to death.

*“See? You can feel it. My heart. My energy. I am alive. While I am alive, you are safe, A-Yuan.”*

Sizhui wasn’t safe now, but that hardly seemed to matter.

He tried to remember how well Hanguang Jun's words had worked then, how safe he had felt cradled in his father's arms. He remembered being carried across Cloud Recess, being buried in a pile of bunnies, being buried in the dirt as a turnip –

But no.

That was not Cloud Recess, and that was not his father.

It was part of a strange patchwork of memories that had been returning to him in slivers since Mo Manner – the sound of Hanguang Jun's secret lullaby played inexplicably on a flute, being plucked out of a turnip patch by a young woman whose face he couldn't quite recall. Clinging to the leg of a man who always smiled, chewing on the end of a black, bamboo flute. Snatches of images of paper butterflies and bowls of lotus rib soup – an uncle with black veins on his neck, another uncle much older, with a laugh that smelt of fruit wine. A grandmother who pinched his cheeks.

A home in the Burial Mounds.

When they'd been captured and held in the Demon Subdue Palace, the sense of déjà vu had nearly driven Sizhui insane. He couldn't remember the place, but it felt so achingly familiar, and it brought memories of a face that looked so much like Wei Wuxian – a face that belonged to a man who wasn't his father, but acted like one, a man he loved like one.

A man he'd known as, "Xian-gege."

He froze, his eyes flickering open to check that no one else had heard the whisper he'd never meant to make, but Wei Wuxian was staring at him, drawing back with eyes so wounded and suspicious that Sizhui wanted to run.

"What did you just say?"

"Nothing!" Sizhui said quickly, dropping his gaze, but before Wei Wuxian could accuse him of lying, Lan Xichen spoke softly.

"A-Yuan," he said, still gazing down at Hanguang Jun. "Do... Have memories returned to you?"

Out of the corner of his eye, Sizhui could see Jiang-zongzhu frowning, and his friends shifting in the corner, but in front of him Wei Wuxian was still staring, confusion and dread screaming behind the tears in his eyes, and Sizhui swallowed.

"I – I don't – there are... I, I don't know what's real, Zewu Jun, I-"

"What do you remember?"

Sizhui hugged his father's hand closer, but the look on Wei Wuxian's face stoppered his voice in his throat. If he was wrong, if this was some made-up memory –

"A-Yuan."

“I, I remember being, being buried,” he whispered, bowing his head. “In – in a field with, with the radishes... They, they said that with enough light and water they could grow me brothers and sisters – and, and I – I remember a man who th-thought he could cook and truly couldn’t, and – and –”

“A-Yuan?” Wei Wuxian whispered, and somehow his voice was even more broken than before. “You – you cannot be A-Yuan – A-Yuan is dead!”

“No,” said Lan Xichen, his hand trembling as it combed carefully through Hanguang Jun’s hair. “Wangji found him. After you fell.”

Wei Wuxian shook his head, staring at Lan Xichen in disbelief. A lump grew in Sizhui’s throat. When he’d started piecing things together, when he’d begun to guess – this was far from how he’d imagined a reunion might be.

“Found him?” Wei Wuxian croaked. “Where?”

“The Burial Mounds.”

*“The Burial Mounds?”*

“Yes.” Lan Xichen closed his eyes. “He was hiding. Feverish. He’d been alone for three days. By the time Wangji got him back to Cloud Recess, he could barely remember his own name. We thought it safer not to remind him of his past, given... Well. It was safer. And... kinder. Wangji was going to tell him everything when he turned twenty, but when you returned... We wondered if the memories would come back too. Now...”

While Lan Xichen spoke, Wei Wuxian’s face grew even paler, his entire body trembling as his eyes grew wider and wider with horror.

“I – I didn’t know,” he stammered, shaking his head wildly – never taking his eyes away from Sizhui. “I didn’t – I didn’t *know*, I – I thought, I thought *everyone* went, I – I didn’t know you – I didn’t – I *left* you? I left you there, in that place, I – I left you alone?”

Sizhui swallowed, looking away. It was too painful to look at the agony on Wei Wuxian’s face. “If you didn’t know I was there, how could you know that you left me?”

Wei Wuxian let out a sob that was so raw it hurt to hear. “A-Yuan... A-Yuan, I’m so sorry, I’m so sorry!”

Sizhui tried to bite back a sob, but he failed, and it broke free as he shook his head, looking back at Wei Wuxian. “Please, please don’t be sorry. You didn’t know – you *couldn’t* know.”

“A-Yuan,” Wei Wuxian whispered, moving as if to reach for Sizhui, but his hands were still bound. Jiang-zongzhu tutted.

“Idiot,” he muttered, grabbing Wei Wuxian’s wrists and attacking the knots.

“Uh...” Jingyi hesitated, a beat longer than he usually did. “What – what, exactly, is going on?”

Swallowing, Sizhui rubbed his cheek with his shoulder, trying to wipe away his tears, but he couldn't speak. He was trembling, now, almost as badly as Wei Wuxian was.

"I—" he tried, but it came out as more of a sob. "I—"

With a soft, sad sigh, Lan Xichen came to his rescue. "When Sizhui was born, his name was Wen Yuan."

Jin Ling gave a sharp hiss. "You were a Wen? A Wen of the Burial Mounds Wen?"

Even as Sizhui flinched, Jingyi bit out, "So what? If after everything you're going to have a fit because Sizhui wasn't born a Lan I *swear* to you Jin Ling—"

"That's not what I meant!" Jin Ling protested, sounding offended enough that Sizhui believed him.

Jingyi, apparently, did not. "Then what *did* you mean?"

"Well—" Jin Ling broke off, and there was a beat before he spoke again. "They—they said that the Wens in the Burial Mounds came from the prison camps—that they were cultivators, an, an army—"

Wei Wuxian let out a hollow laugh, a sound half-mad and broken, and it sent shivers down Sizhui's spine. "They did come from the prison camps. Including A-Yuan. He had just turned two when I got him out. The others—the others..."

It was Jiang-zongzhu who spoke next, and to Sizhui's surprise, there seemed to be a note of shame in his voice. "They were no army. Few of them were cultivators. Most were elderly."

"That's—that's..." Jin Ling trailed off, and though it was tricky to see around Jiang-zongzhu, Sizhui thought he was tucking his knees up to his chest.

"Horrible," Zizhen supplied, his voice hollow. "It's horrible. Who could do something like that?"

Jingyi snorted, the sound void of all humour. "The person who's taken all of us hostage, for one. His scum of a father, for another. No offense to you, Jin Ling."

Jiang-zongzhu looked over his shoulder at them, and though Sizhui couldn't see his face, he could imagine the look on it when the others fell quiet. The clan leader shifted, moving a little closer to Jin Ling, and Sizhui saw that the ropes around Wei Wuxian's wrists were gone.

"A-Yuan," Wei Wuxian whispered tearfully, reaching out, but then he hesitated, his hand trembling. "A-Yuan..."

Something inside of Sizhui broke, and he tumbled towards Wei Wuxian. In the span of a heartbeat, Wei Wuxian's arms wrapped around him, holding him close, and another sob broke from Sizhui's chest. He kept a firm grip on his father's hand with his left hand, but he clung to Wei Wuxian with his right, sobbing. He felt the arms around him tighten, and somehow, Sizhui felt a little safer.

But he felt no less afraid. Not with his father's hand so cold in his.

Hanguang Jun had only become his father after Wei Wuxian had died – could the world really be so cruel to give Wei Wuxian back, only to rip Hanguang Jun away? To be with one father, did Sizhui have to lose the other?

He didn't notice his sobs getting more frantic and desperate until he couldn't breathe for crying, and his gasps became chokes in his throat. With a sob of his own, Wei Wuxian held him closer, stroking his hair.

“Breathe, A-Yuan,” he begged, hugging him tighter, but Wei Wuxian's own chest was rising and falling just as frantically and desperately as Sizhui's was, and his words were choking too. “Please, please breathe. I – I can't – you have to breathe, A-Yuan, you have to-” but Wei Wuxian's words drowned in desperate, wrenching sobs, gasps as frantic as Sizhui's, and Sizhui's head began to spin as he choked and spluttered for air –

“Wei Wuxian,” Lan Xichen said urgently. “Loosen your grip, Sizhui can't –”

But as Wei Wuxian's arms loosened, Sizhui felt like he was falling, the terror tearing through him so fiercely that he thought he might never breathe again, and beneath him Wei Wuxian was choking –

*“A-Xian!”*

Wei Wuxian froze, locking Sizhui in his arms, and Sizhui felt himself rock slightly as Jiang Wanyin shook Wei Wuxian's shoulders.

“Breathe,” the clan leader ordered, and though he couldn't see with his head buried in Wei Wuxian's chest, Sizhui could feel Jiang Wanyin tug one of Wei Wuxian's hands away from him. “Wei Wuxian, breathe, *now*.” Wei Wuxian choked, and Jiang-zongzhu shook him again. “No, properly. Breathe with me, now, or I'll break your legs. Out first –”

Sizhui heard the clan leader let out a long, exaggerated breath, and Wei Wuxian copied. Jiang-zongzhu breathed in, deep, and Wei Wuxian copied. His chest rose slowly, fell slowly, and Sizhui jumped as he felt a hand on the small of his back.

“You too, Lan Sizhui,” said Jiang-zongzhu, and though his tone was a little gentler, it was no less firm. “Out – then in.”

Guided by the newly forced rhythm of Wei Wuxian's chest, Sizhui obeyed. It was difficult – his breaths kept crying to hitch in his throat, and he had no idea how he was still shaking so badly when he was so, utterly exhausted.

“Idiot,” Jiang Wanyin muttered after a while, shaking Wei Wuxian's shoulder again, and somehow making the insult sound like an endearment.

Wei Wuxian shuddered. “Sizhui, am – am I holding too tight?”

Not trusting himself to speak, Sizhui shook his head, and he felt Wei Wuxian relax just a fraction. Keeping his face hidden, Sizhui shifted his grip on his father's hand, searching for

his wrist again.

He pulse was still there.

Just.

## Chapter End Notes

The link to the Spanish translation:

<https://www.wattpad.com/1042973250-%F0%9D%90%8B%F0%9D%90%80-%F0%9D%90%93%F0%9D%90%91%F0%9D%90%80%F0%9D%90%86%F0%9D%90%84%F0%9D%90%83%F0%9D%90%88%F0%9D%90%80-%F0%9D%90%8D%F0%9D%90%8E-%F0%9D%90%84%F0%9D%90%92-%F0%9D%90%84%F0%9D%90%8B-%F0%9D%90%85%F0%9D%90%88%F0%9D%90%8D%F0%9D%90%80%F0%9D%90%8B-%E1%B5%90%E1%B5%88%E1%B6%BB%CB%A2-cap%C3%ADtulo-oo1>

## Chapter 2

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

He had no intention of falling asleep, but he must have done, because when the wagon jerked to a stop Sizhui woke with a start. Somehow, he'd ended up laying alongside Hanguang Jun, his head pillowed on Wei Wuxian's lap, only a few inches from his father's. His hand was still clutching Hanguang Jun's, and Wei Wuxian's hand was tight on his shoulder. Sudden terror seized Sizhui, and he grappled with his father's wrist.

If something had changed, if Hanguang Jun had – they would have told him, they would've woken him, they –

It was there. His pulse was still there.

He looked up at Wei Wuxian. His jaw was tight, and his dark eyes were fixed on the door, but they were also red from crying, and he was no less pale than he had been when Sizhui closed his eyes.

"No one move," he said, and his voice croaked as though he hadn't used it for a hundred years. "If we make a fuss, Lan Zhan –"

"We know," said Jiang-zongzhu, though it sounded as though he was gritting his teeth.

A shiver ran down Sizhui's spine, and he struggled to sit up. Wei Wuxian helped, shifting him upright as they heard the bolts sliding on the other side of the door. There was a loud bang as a fist slammed into the door, and Sizhui jumped. At once, Wei Wuxian wrapped an arm around his chest.

"Get away from the door!" a voice barked. There was a pause, and then the door opened. It wasn't much lighter outside than it was within the wagon, but in the torchlight Sizhui could see several Jin guards standing outside, their swords at the ready.

Standing in the middle of them, arms folded over his chest, was Su She.

Hatred, unlike anything he'd even *imagined* before, burned in Sizhui's chest, searing through every part of his lungs, and his hands curled into fists at his side.

Su She gave a single nod, and one of the guards stepped forward, eyes glinting over everyone in the wagon. Then, with a movement so fast Sizhui barely saw it, the man seized his ankle, yanking Sizhui out of the wagon. He felt Wei Wuxian grapple with his robes, clutch desperately at him, but the guard was too fast and too strong, and even as Wei Wuxian roared Sizhui was pulled far enough out for the guard to wrap a thick arm around his throat. Sizhui struggled to right his feet beneath him, but the arm squeezed, and he choked.



“What are you doing?” Wei Wuxian yelled, but the anger in his voice was nothing to the terror in his eyes, even when Su She began to talk.

“Making sure you all toe the line,” he said, and Sizhui saw a glint of metal out of the corner of his eye – very, very close to his eye.

He fought back a whimper. Wasn’t it enough that he was in a headlock that threatened to crush his throat beyond repair? That Hanguang Jun was unconscious and bleeding and *dying*?

“If the great Hanguang Jun didn’t make it through the night you might do something reckless,” Su She continued. “Even if he did – this way we can make sure you come out one by one. Nice and easy. Now, anyone still carrying any sort of weapon – like a flute, or a Zidian – take it off and leave it here. If we find anything on you when we get to the cells, well...”

The arm around Sizhui’s neck tightened, and the glint of metal shifted as the knife blade tapped against his cheek. Sizhui didn’t let himself make a sound. He knew if he did, it would only make things harder for the others.

“Su She!” Wei Wuxian spat. “Don’t you touch him!”

“I won’t have to, if everyone behaves. Jiang-zongzhu, you first. Come to the end of the wagon, nice and easy.”

Something in Wei Wuxian shifted, and he flinched around, grabbing the other man’s arm. “Jiang Cheng, Jiang Cheng, please –”

“Already done,” Jiang-zongzhu growled, and Sizhui wasn’t sure what they were talking about until the Clan Leader reached the wagon door. There was no sign of the Zidian on his wrist. “Why don’t you take me as your hostage now, Su She? Leave the children out of this!”

“I think they’re in a little too deep for that,” sneered Su She, nodding at another one of the guards. Sizhui winced as the man blocked Jiang-zongzhu’s spiritual energy once more, locking a pair of iron shackles around his wrists.

And then a trio of guards took him away, disappearing into a dark door in a wall of stone.

“Jiujiu!” Jin Ling called from the back of the wagon, fear tight in his voice. “*Jiujiu!*”

“Nie-zongzhu, next,” said Su She. Much like the way he’d got into the wagon in the first place, Nie Huaisang left it without any fuss. His head hung low, eyes dull and misted over, and it almost looked like he didn’t notice the chains. For the first time, Sizhui realised that he didn’t have a fan. It looked wrong.

Su She called Zizhen out next, and then Jin Ling, then Jingyi. One at a time, Sizhui watched his friends disappear in chains – all into the same door, but that didn’t mean much. With his head stuck, Sizhui couldn’t see whether the wall belonged to a house or a city or a fortress. They’d all been taken inside, but that didn’t mean they were still together.

“Lan-zongzhu,” said Su She, and Lan Xichen flinched. “You next.”

Hesitating, Lan Xichen tightened his hand around Hanguang Jun's, but Su She slashed the knife across Sizhui's cheek. He gasped, more in shock than in pain. The wound wasn't deep, but it did sting, and Lan Xichen's eyes filled with horror as Wei Wuxian banged a fist against the floor.

*"Su She!"*

"That will heal quickly," said Su She. "The same can't be said if you make him lose an eye, Lan Xichen. Move."

It felt shameful to be so relieved when Lan Xichen moved to the end of the wagon, when he held out his hands prepared for the chains.

"Sizhui," he whispered, as the Jin guards shoved him away. "I'm so sorry."

He was gone before Sizhui could say a word.

"Now you, Yiling Patriarch," Su She said, tapping the knife against Sizhui's cheek again.

"If you hurt him again, I swear to you –"

"Get out of the wagon, and I won't have to."

But Sizhui's heart began to race. If Wei Wuxian got out of the wagon, Hanguang Jun would be alone, alone and unconscious, with the man who had stabbed him.

It looked like the same thoughts were running through Wei Wuxian's mind, and Sizhui shook his head slightly. He could cope with a cut to the face – he could cope with a face scarred beyond recognition, he – he would even cope without his eyes, if he had to – but he couldn't cope without his father. He couldn't, he couldn't –

The knife rested against the bottom of Sizhui's eye-socket, its tip poised to bite into the soft flesh beneath his eye. Sizhui froze. If Su She drove the knife in, and up, it would slice straight through his eye – or cut it clean from his skull.

"Don't!" Wei Wuxian cried, and his voice wasn't defiant anymore. It was broken, and afraid, and though he hadn't thought it possible, Sizhui's fear grew fiercer. "Please – Su She, please, Sizhui has never done anything to you, don't –"

"Get out," Su She said slowly, digging the knife a little deeper, breaking the skin. *"Now."*

"Okay, okay, I'm going!" Wei Wuxian shifted, reaching beneath Hanguang Jun to lift him up, but before he got the chance, Su She clicked his tongue.

"Leave him there."

Wei Wuxian closed his eyes for a moment, before glaring back at Su She. "What are you going to do to him?"

Su She gave a smug laugh, and Sizhui would have scowled, if fear hadn't frozen him so completely. "You said it yourself – his Excellency is fond of Zewu Jun, and would hate to see his sworn brother suffer so deep a loss. He is anxious that Hanguang Jun see a doctor. But if you insist on wasting time, perhaps it will be too late."

"Let me go with him," said Wei Wuxian. "Please –"

"Of course," simpered Su She. "Stay right where you are – if you think Hanguang Jun will forgive you for watching as his son's eyes are cut from his skull."

The knife sunk beneath Sizhui's skin with a searing flash of pain and he choked on his own cry, terrified that calling out would push the blade higher, deeper, that it would blind him forever, and -

"*Sizhui!*" Through a blur of tears, Sizhui saw Wei Wuxian scramble to the end of the wagon, his hands held up in a desperate surrender. "Su She, stop it!"

Chuckling, Su She pulled the knife out, and Sizhui gasped, clamping his eyes shut. "See? Was that really so hard?"

"Sizhui – Sizhui, are you okay?"

"I – I'm okay, Wei-qianbei," he stammered, opening his eyes, but they were watering so badly he could barely see. He heard, rather than saw, the guards blocking Wei Wuxian's spiritual energy and shackling his wrists.

"I swear," growled Wei Wuxian, his voice quaking dangerously. "I swear, Su She, I will kill you, if you hurt him again, I will kill you –"

"I'm terrified," drawled Su She, nodding at the guards. "Take him."

Another pair of guards began to march Wei Wuxian in the same direction as the others, and Sizhui was released from the headlock, only to be dragged back upright by his hair. With a practised hand, a guard he didn't recognise blocked his golden core, and locked heavy, iron shackles around his wrists.

And then, they dragged him away from his father.

Sizhui looked over his shoulder, trying desperately not to lose sight of the wagon, of Hanguang Jun, but he was shoved roughly through the door, and into a dark hallway.

"Move," growled the guard behind him, the one who had put him in so vicious a headlock.

So Sizhui moved. The corridor was dark and narrow. Two guards walked abreast in front of him, and their shoulders brushed against the walls. He couldn't see much ahead of them, but the corridor carved a steady path downwards. Sometimes the ground sloped, and other times there were steps cut into the stone, but the further they went, the closer the air felt. Sizhui didn't know if it was truly stuffier, or if it was just his fear, but either way it was a struggle to keep his breathing steady and even.

*Concentrate*, his father's voice said in his mind. For a moment, it stole his breath. No. *Concentrate*.

Sizhui did his best. If Hanguang Jun was in his place, he would be able to walk with his head held high, his face expressionless.

*If Hanguang Jun wasn't unconscious, and alone, and at the mercy of the man who made him that way.*

He heard the mutter of voices, the barked orders of the guards, and then they rounded a corner, and a shiver ran down Sizhui's spine. He had never seen a dungeon before, but the door before him looked so ominous he doubted it could belong anywhere else. The bolts locking it shut were as thick as Sizhui's wrist, and there were also iron chains running the length and breadth of it, but what was more alarming to Sizhui were the wards. Some were talismans attached to the door and the wall, but others were carved into the wood, or painted in a weeping red that looked so much like blood.

Two guards stood on either side, and they bowed to the guards leading Sizhui, freeing the bolts and unchaining the door. It screeched open, and the guards pushed Sizhui inside. He heard it close again behind him, the sickening crunch of the bolts sliding into place, and the guards pushed him further forwards. There was a single cell in front of him, split from the entrance chamber by a wall of iron bars, and another guard stood before it. He nodded, opening the door to the cell, and then Sizhui was shoved inside.

Wei Wuxian rushed to his side, grabbing his shoulder and surveying the wound beneath his eye with growing horror. "Sizhui... *A-Yuan*, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry –"

"It's not your fault," Sizhui insisted, blinking back tears. They stung his eyes, but if they fell, the sting of the wound would be worse. "They – they – Hanguang Jun..."

Wei Wuxian flinched as if Sizhui had struck him with a whip, his hand snatching back to press tightly against his own chest. "Still," he said, his eyes flickering down for a moment, before returning up to meet Sizhui's. "I'm sorry."

Swallowing, Sizhui glanced around the cell, looking at each of the others.

Jiang-zongzhu was leaning against the back wall in a way that would look casual if it weren't for the stiffness in his shoulders, and how tightly his jaw was clenched. Jin Ling was pressed against his side, his eyes wide, but somewhat dazed, and though he too was slumped against the wall, he just looked small, and afraid. Beside him, Zizhen was twisting his hands in his sleeves, the chains around his wrists jangling softly as he did. The corner of his mouth twitched up when he caught Sizhui's eye, but it was far from a smile and lasted only a second before he looked down, pursing his lips.

In the far back corner, Nie-zongzhu was on the ground again, sitting back against the wall, and staring at nothing. His right hand was curled almost shut, his thumb twitching up and down impulsively, as though it was trying to run up and down the side of a fan it no longer held.

Dread grew in Sizhui's chest, and he looked back at Wei Wuxian, doing his best to keep his voice steady. "Where is Jingyi? Where is Zewu Jun?"

But Wei Wuxian shook his head, and when Sizhui looked to the others they shook their heads in turn.

They were... gone? His father and his uncle and his shixiong – why were they gone? Where – why was Sizhui the only Lan left here, why –

"Sizhui!" Wei Wuxian cried, grabbing his shoulders again, and Sizhui realised that his knees had buckled.

"I'm okay," he stuttered, but Wei Wuxian led him to the wall.

"Here," he murmured, "sit down. Sit down..."

Sizhui obeyed. He was good at doing what he was told, at following orders. It was almost a comfort, to have someone tell him what he should do. Wei Wuxian sat beside him, taking his hand, and Sizhui took a deep breath.

He wasn't alone.

He leant into Wei Wuxian's side, letting his head rest on the man's shoulder, and Wei Wuxian sniffed, resting his cheek on Sizhui's head.

Time passed strangely. The minutes seemed to drag, with only the murmured conversation of Jin Ling and Jiang Cheng at the back of the cell breaking the quiet, but it also seemed just seconds after Sizhui sat down that he heard the grinding sound of the metal bolts shifting on the other side of the heavy wooden door.

He sprang to his feet, Wei Wuxian jumping up beside him.

"Get back!" the man ordered, pushing Sizhui behind him even as Jiang-zongzhu pushed towards the front of the cell.

"But –" Sizhui's protest died on his lips when Wei Wuxian looked over his shoulder, pleading silently for him to stay back. Taking a deep breath, Sizhui nodded, and Wei Wuxian looked back at the door.

Sizhui shifted a little to see better as the door started screeching open, and Jin Ling and Zizhen stepped forward, flanking him on either side. Jin Ling's hands were curled into fists, his jaw jutting out defiantly, but there was a flicker of fear in his eyes. Zizhen was still, very still, but his hands were no longer twisting in his sleeves, and though his eyes flickered between Jiang Cheng and Wei Wuxian, he looked ready to stand his ground.

Sizhui turned his attention to the door, and his stomach twisted. Jin Guangyao was the first to stride through, looking disturbingly calm. Behind him was Lan Xichen, a slight stumble in his step, cradling Sizhui's father in his arms. Hanguang Jun's head was tucked down a little, resting against his brother's chest almost like a child looking for comfort, but his eyes were closed, and he was so, so still, and Sizhui couldn't see whether or not he was breathing.

Several guards filed in behind Lan Xichen, and the last one was dragging Jingyi by the collar. His lip was bleeding.

“Are you sure, Er-ge?” said Jin Guangyao, looking beseechingly at Lan Xichen and clearly continuing a conversation that had begun outside. It was almost like the cell wasn’t there, that there weren’t six other prisoners watching. Zewu Jun closed his eyes, and turned his face away. Jin Guangyao’s eyes narrowed a fraction. “Not even for Wangji?”

Lan Xichen stiffened, his hands clenching around Hanguang Jun’s robes, and as small as it was, the movement broadcast his uncle’s fear and grief to Sizhui. He didn’t doubt Jin Guangyao saw it too, and his stomach twisted tighter.

“Very well,” Jin Guangyao sighed, waving his hand. A guard stepped forward and opened the cell door, and Lan Xichen stepped inside without a word. Sizhui’s heart beat furiously in his chest as his uncle walked past him and then slowly sat down towards the wall, Hanguang Jun still clutched to his chest.

“Zewu Jun?” Sizhui whispered, and Lan Xichen looked up, giving the slightest nod.

He was alive. Hanguang Jun was alive.

The door slid back into place with a clang, and Sizhui looked back towards it. His heart seized.

The cell door was closed – and Jingyi was still on the other side of it.

“Hanguang Jun is now stable,” said Jin Guangyao, speaking as calmly as though he were addressing a banquet. “When this is all over, he will be allowed to wake. Before then, there’s work to be done.”

“Work?” spat Jiang Wanyin.

“Allowed?” Wei Wuxian echoed hollowly.

“Yes.” Jin Guangyao’s voice was ice and steel. “Wei Wuxian – the Yiling Patriarch... You’re going to fix this.”

“Fix – fix what?”

“Everything. First, you are going to come up with a way to take out the other sect leaders. If possible, their adult heirs, too. Then, you’re going to invent a story – the tale of your sins, and how you framed my mistakes as murders, how you paid false witnesses, how you manipulated Su She into accidentally betraying the other clans – you’re going to create a story that fills all the holes, enough for the new clan leaders to buy it. Eventually, though, I will catch you, and you will confess. But before then, there’s one more thing you are going to do,” he paused, smiling warmly. It made Sizhui very cold. “You are going to create a spell to erase the last three weeks from Xichen’s memory.”

Lan Xichen looked up sharply, and Sizhui took an unconscious step backwards.

“What?” hissed Wei Wuxian, and Jin Guangyao’s smile grew.

“You are going to create a spell to erase the last three weeks from Lan Xichen’s memory,” he repeated, turning his gaze to Sizhui’s uncle. “It will all be over, then, Er-ge. We will fix the world together, and Wangji will be safe.”

“A-Yao...” Lan Xichen whispered, his voice utterly broken. Sizhui couldn’t look at him for more than a moment – it seemed so wrong to see his uncle with such clear horror on his face, for Zewu Jun to look so utterly vulnerable. Sizhui stepped in front of his uncle, blocking any view Jin Guangyao could get of him.

Jin Guangyao’s eyes narrowed dangerously, but before he could speak again, Jiang-zongzhu interrupted.

“You’re insane,” he growled. “You’re completely insane! What makes you think Wei Wuxian *would* do those things for you, even if he could?”

Jin Guangyao was not smiling anymore. He tilted his chin up, just a fraction, his eyes hardening.

With a curt yell, the guard moved his grip from Jingyi’s collar to his throat, slamming him into the wall. Quick as death, he slammed his fist into Jingyi’s stomach, the blow hitting with enough force to make Jingyi choke, but then he hit him again, and again, and between desperate gasps for air, Jingyi spat up blood.

“Stop!” Sizhui cried, pushing past Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng to through himself at the bars of the cell. “Please, stop it, stop it!”

The guard’s hand tightened, crushing around Jingyi’s neck, and Jingyi’s eyes widened, fixing on Sizhui with a terror that made his heart stop.

*“Jingyi!”*

Jin Guangyao held up his hand, and the guard’s grip loosened. Jingyi gasped, choking and coughing, and Sizhui felt a hand on his shoulder. Wei Wuxian, pulling him back from the bars, pulling him close.

“If Wei Wuxian decides not to cooperate,” said Jin Guangyao slowly, “or any of you try to stop him, Lan Jingyi will learn first-hand just what it was like in the dungeons of Wen Ruohan. And when there’s nothing left of him but a corpse and a shattered soul, we will do the same to Ouyang Zizhen, and then to Lan Sizhui. To Jin Ling too, if we have to.” He took a step towards the cell, and Wei Wuxian tugged Sizhui behind him. Jin Guangyao’s smile returned. “I will supply you with paper and ink, Wei Wuxian, and you will work. There will be a guard in this chamber at all times, and if you try to activate any talisman without my permission, they will alert me, and I will kill Lan Jingyi. At the end of the day, you will return the paper and the pens and the ink, and in return I will let the little Lan spend the night out here, where you can see him. But I find anything in your notes that doesn’t look like what you are supposed to be doing, I will kill him.”

Sizhui's head spun wildly, and nausea crawled up his throat. His fists curled around Wei Wuxian's robes, clutching them tight, and slowly, Wei Wuxian nodded.

"Don't hurt him," he said, his voice hollow. "I will do as you say, but it will take time. Don't hurt Jingyi. Please."

"You have two days to come up with a way to dispose of the other sect leaders. All of them."

"I don't-"

Jingyi choked as the guard clenched his hand around his neck once more, and Wei Wuxian stepped closer to the bars.

"I'll try – I'll try."

Jin Guangyao stared at him for a moment, and then he gave a sharp nod. The guard ripped Jingyi away from the wall, and then threw him back out of the door, into the hall, and then he was out of sight.

"Jingyi!"

Another guard strode towards the cell, a bag in his hand, and Wei Wuxian darted back, pushing Sizhui behind him. The guard pushed the bag between the bars, and several loose sheets of paper fluttered out onto the floor.

"Two days." Jin Guangyao said, and then he turned, stepping out of the door. Most of the other guards followed, but two remained in the chamber outside the cell, standing guard on either side of the door.

Wei Wuxian spun around, crumpling to his knees at Lan Xichen's side and snatching Hanguang Jun's hand. "Lan Zhan... Lan Zhan..."

But Lan Xichen shook his head slowly, and Sizhui tumbled to his uncle's side, grabbing at his sleeve. "What – what do you mean, what do you-?" Horror strangled him, cutting off his words, and Sizhui grappled for his father's hand.

"He won't wake up," Lan Xichen whispered, staring down at his brother's face. "He is in a coma. Even if he wasn't so weak, if he wasn't wounded, he – the spell... He won't..."

"Allowed," Wei Wuxian echoed. "He won't wake until the spell-caster allows it?"

Lan Xichen nodded, another tear running down his face.

"Oh, Lan Zhan..." Wei Wuxian whispered again, and then he closed his eyes.

Sizhui swallowed. "But... but he's not going... he won't..."

Lan Xichen shut his eyes, his head bowing lower. "He's not dying. No."



A sob rose up Sizhui's through, too bitter and twisted to really be relief, and he looked at his uncle. Zewu Jun had always been the more expressive of the Twin Jades, but Sizhui had never thought he could look like this, so completely and utterly broken. He knew how deeply Lan Xichen loved his sworn brother, how close they had been for longer than Sizhui had been alive. How deeply Lan Xichen had *trusted* Jin Guangyao. Sizhui couldn't imagine how it must feel to have such a trust to violently shattered, to know that someone you loved so fiercely had done so much evil – to see them stand by, while your family bled out in your arms.

It was a wonder Zewu Jun was even upright at all.

“Bobo...” Sizhui whispered, and Lan Xichen shut his eyes, but he also tilted his head to the side slightly, nodding at his shoulder in a silent invitation. Uncaring of grace or propriety or etiquette, Sizhui clambered around to his uncle's side to lean against him. Xichen shuddered, but he also let his cheek rest atop Sizhui's hair.

“Wei-qianbei,” Zizhen asked weakly, “Wei-qianbei, are you – are you going to do what he says? My... my...” The word ‘father’ remained unspoken, but they all heard it, and Sizhui looked at Wei Wuxian carefully.

Yesterday, he would have said that Wei Wuxian would fix all of this, that of course he'd be capable of wrecking Jin Guangyao's plans and setting them all free. Wei Wuxian could do anything – he was as talented a cultivator as Hanguang Jun, and twice as daring.

But Hanguang Jun was unconscious, and defenceless, and Wei Wuxian looked as lost as the rest of them. A creeping, horrible feeling crept through Sizhui's body, starting in his stomach and working through the rest of him like a slow acting poison. Wei Wuxian might not be able to fix this.

Wei Wuxian didn't answer Zizhen. Instead, he squeezed Hanguang Jun's hand and stood up, collecting the paper from the ground and shuffling it into a pile. Then, he pulled a brush, some ink and an inkstone out of the bag, and began to write.

Hours passed. Zizhen sat beside Sizhui after a while, close enough that their knees touching. His hands were winding so tightly into his robes that twice Sizhui had to stop him before he cut off circulation to his thumb entirely. Jin Ling sat in front of them, but he couldn't stop fidgeting either, and his fist pulsed constantly, trying to tighten around the hilt of a sword it couldn't reach.

The other two boys tried to think of how to escape, whispering ‘if's and ‘perhaps’ until their voices grew hoarse, but they got nowhere. Jiang Cheng sat with his back to Jin Ling's, glaring at the door and sometimes offering angry suggestions over his shoulder, but they all knew the plans were useless. The others seemed to feel better for speaking them anyway, but Sizhui couldn't. He had nothing useful to say.

He wasn't sure he had ever felt quite so useless in his life.

He wanted to ask Wei Wuxian if he could help, but since the man started writing he hadn't looked up. He barely even seemed to breathe. Sizhui wasn't sure that interrupting was the

best idea.

It felt like an eternity before they heard the bolts on the door draw back again, and the jangling of the chains across them. Everyone sprung to their feet, except Lan Xichen and Nie-zongzhu, who both barely seemed to register the fact that the door was opening.

This time, Jin Guangyao walked through alone. He tilted his head to the side a fraction, and the guards nodded. Jin Guangyao smiled.

“Good,” he said softly. “Wei Wuxian – what have you achieved today?”

Scowling, Wei Wuxian thrust his hand through the bars of the cell, holding out a fistful of paper. One of the guards stepped forward and snatched it away, passing it to Jin Guangyao. He took a long time to read it, so long that Sizhui felt the urge to fidget impatiently – but Sizhui didn’t fidget. That was Jingyi, Jingyi who Jin Guangyao had promised to bring back, Jingyi who was nowhere in sight.

But finally, Jin Guangyao nodded. “Less than I’d hoped, but I suppose that’s understandable.” He smiled, looking at Hanguang Jun for a long moment, and Sizhui felt his own cheeks burn red with rage. “For today, it will be sufficient. Tomorrow, I expect more.”

He turned and walked out of the door, and a moment later Jingyi was bundled into the room by the same guard that had beat him before. There was a bruise blooming on his lip, and a shoe print on the front of his robes, but he was upright, and glaring. Sizhui swallowed, stepping closer to the door of the cell, but it wasn’t opened. Instead, the guard chained Jingyi to the wall outside, before filing out through the door with his fellow guards, leaving the prisoners alone.

“Jingyi!” Sizhui pressed himself against the bars of the cell door. “Are you okay?”

Jingyi crooked up the corner of his mouth into a smile, but it was only to try and calm Sizhui, and Sizhui knew it. “I’ll be fine. Hanguang Jun?”

“Stable,” said Sizhui, and Jingyi nodded, a little of the tension easing from his shoulders.

“Thank god...” he breathed. Then his eyes widened, and his eyebrows lowered. “Sizhui, your face...?”

Sizhui shook his head slightly. He’d almost forgotten. “They’re not deep. I’ll be fine.”

“Did they hurt you?” Wei Wuxian demanded. “After they took you away?”

Jingyi looked at the man almost sheepishly, and Sizhui fought the urge to roll his eyes. “Not, not much. I might’ve said something about Su She’s mother, and... well...” he looked down at the shoe print on his chest. Then, he smirked faintly. “I think it was worth it.”

“I don’t,” said Sizhui hotly – far more hotly than he meant to, and Jingyi winced.

“I’m fine, Sizhui, really.”

“Sizhui’s right,” said Wei Wuxian, before Sizhui could say anything. “You shouldn’t provoke them, Jingyi, not now. They won’t hesitate to hurt you far worse than a kick ever could.”

“I – I know,” said Jingyi, but when Sizhui tried to catch his eye he looked away, his arms winding around his stomach.

Sizhui’s own stomach squirmed. “Jingyi –”

“They didn’t *do* anything,” said Jingyi softly. “But there’s, there’s another cell. Where they kept me. The things... the things on the wall...”

Jiang Cheng swore under his breath, a stream of words so vile that Sizhui’s cheeks burnt.

“What... what things?” asked Zizhen uncertainly. It was clear from the look on his face that he was rather sure he didn’t want to know.

Wei Wuxian closed his eyes. “When Jin Guangyao was a spy in Wen Ruohan’s court, his job was designing torture equipment.”

Sizhui felt like his stomach had been pulled straight out of his body. “*What?*”

“No – no he wouldn’t –” Jin Ling broke off, looking desperately at Jiang Wanyin, who gave a single nod.

“No one used any of it,” said Jingyi quickly. “It – it all stayed on the wall, but... but...”

“Fuck...” growled Jiang Wanyin, and then he seized Wei Wuxian’s wrist. “We need to do something. Perhaps you and I have made mistakes we deserve to die for but there are children here.”

Sizhui vehemently disagreed with the clan leader’s second sentence, but it seemed to resonate with Wei Wuxian. He gave a sharp nod.

“I need time.”

“We don’t have much of it,” said Jiang Wanyin, and Wei Wuxian nodded again, looking at Hanguang Jun. His lip quivered, and he closed his eyes.

“Let me think,” he muttered, tugging at his hair. “Let me... let me think...”

There was a soft, fluttering sound, and Sizhui looked towards the corner. Nie Huaisang was holding out a few loose pies of paper and a small stick of charcoal, looking up at Wei Wuxian with hopeless eyes. Something in Wei Wuxian’s face softened, and he took the paper.

“Are you okay, Nie-xiong?”

Nie Huaisang blinked, and then he closed his eyes, turning his face away from Wei Wuxian.

“Nie-xiong –”

“I’m sorry.”

Sizhui frowned, watching Nie-zongzhu intently, and he felt Lan Xichen raise his head to stare in the same direction.

“Sorry?” Wei Wuxian asked, and Nie Huaisang shook his head.

“This wasn’t... this wasn’t supposed to happen...”

Wei Wuxian stiffened, his eyes widening, but Sizhui just felt more confused.

“It was you...” Wei Wuxian murmured, and Nie Huaisang flinched.

Nodded.

“Huaisang,” Lan Xichen breathed, and Nie-zongzhu opened his eyes, staring at Zewu Jun. His face was the picture of defeat, but there was a steel in his eyes that Sizhui had never seen before.

“He killed Da-ge,” Nie Huaisang said, and beneath its trembling his voice was strong as stone. “He had to pay. I just didn’t think... I never thought...” His eyes flickered to Hanguang Jun, and his voice trailed off.

“You... you were behind all of this?” Lan Xichen whispered in disbelief. “You put the sword ghost in Mo Manner, you – you wrote to Sisi and Bicao, you – you?”

“No,” scoffed Jiang Wanyin, but then he looked at Wei Wuxian’s face, and then at Nie-zongzhu’s, and he jerked back as though he’d been slapped. “*You?*”

Nie Huaisang dropped his gaze, staring. “He said he was healing my brother. He taught me how to play his songs. He promised they would help. He tricked me into helping him *kill Da-ge*, and he never thought I’d figure it out.”

Lan Xichen drew in a choked breath, but before he could say anything Wei Wuxian spoke again. “When did you know?”

A tear trailed down Nie Huaisang’s cheek. “The day of Da-ge’s funeral.”

“Huaisang,” Lan Xichen said, shaking his head slightly. He was shivering, now, and Sizhui clutched his uncle’s hand. “Why didn’t you say something?”

Nie Huaisang gave a hollow laugh. “To who? Meng Yao was my friend – if I couldn’t trust him, how could I trust you, Er-ge? Who did I have, when Da-ge was gone, and Jin Guangyao had killed him? Da-ge was dead. Zonghui was dead. Wei-xiong was dead. There was no one left alive I could trust. No one left alive who would listen.”

Lan Xichen gripped Sizhui’s hand so hard it hurt. “So you... Mo Xuanyu...”

“I didn’t force him, if that’s what you’re asking,” said Nie-zongzhu, looking down at his hands. “I just reminded him of the ritual. Told him that if I was going to do it, I would

summon no less than the Yiling Patriarch.” Somehow, Nie Huaisang’s eyes grew even sadder. “No need to summon a spirit that was actually evil, one who might hurt innocent people. And I –” he broke off, squeezing his eyes shut.

“You – you –” Jiang Wanyin spluttered, but Wei Wuxian shook his head.

“It doesn’t matter, now,” he said softly.

Jiang Wanyin glared at him furiously, but Wei Wuxian just looked sad, and the clan leader shut his mouth, storming to the other side of the cell. After a moment, Jin Ling followed, a little golden shadow, and the rage in Jiang Wanyin’s eyes softened to grief and fear, and Sizhui looked away.

“The rest of you should try to get some sleep,” said Wei Wuxian.

“Can’t we help you?” asked Zizhen, and Jingyi nodded.

“Let us help, Wei-qianbei!”

In truth, Sizhui thought that Wei Wuxian was humouring his friends when he asked them to describe the talismans they saw. There was no way the man hadn’t memorised it all himself better than they had. Eventually, the questions waned, replaced by the sound of charcoal scratching against paper, and Sizhui fell asleep to the sound of Wei Wuxian’s writing, with his father’s pulse beneath his fingers.

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! As a good chunk of this story is already written, I’ll upload a chapter a day for the next week or so, and then after that it will probably reduce to every two days. Until next time, take care!

# Chapter 3

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

There was no way out.

Wei Wuxian had guessed as much from the beginning, but by the second night, he was certain. The wards were too complex, too well layered. Even if they weren't all bound in qi blocking chains, even if he had talisman paper and ink and all the books in Gusu, it would be impossible to break through, not without weeks, or even months of studying.

They did not have weeks, or months. They didn't even have days. If Wei Wuxian tried to stall, they would torture Lan Jingyi until they broke him, until he died, and when they had finished, they would do the same to Sizhui, and Jin Ling.

That was a price Wei Wuxian would never be willing to pay.

Today had been bad enough. He had sketched out the bones of a curse to target the other clan leaders the day before, fleshed it out a little today, but apparently, it wasn't enough. The guards had beaten Jingyi in the hallway, out of sight, but they had all heard the sound of the whip, and the muffled cries that Jingyi must have tried to hide behind gritted teeth.

Sizhui had left Zewu Jun's side for the first time all day, flying at the bars of the cell door with a desperate cry of his own, but it had been another agonising few minutes before the guards finally dragged Jingyi back inside.

They'd chained him to the wall again, and he had refused to turn and show them his back, promising Sizhui that he was fine, and adding a "Lying is forbidden," with a crook of his lip that barely hid his wince.

Sizhui hadn't said a word since. Eventually, he had peeled himself away from the bars, stumbled back to Zewu Jun's side. He had taken Lan Zhan's wrist again, and stared down at him as though silently begging the man to wake. The man. His father.

Lan Zhan was A-Yuan's father.

If Wei Wuxian had known that three days ago, it would be a comfort beyond anything else he could imagine. Knowing that A-Yuan was not only alive, but thriving, knowing that Lan Zhan loved him, and cared for him – that neither A-Yuan nor Lan Zhan had ever been alone – it would have been enough for Wei Wuxian to die a happy man, but now –

Now they were doomed, because Wei Wuxian had returned to the world, and ripped their lives apart. If he'd fought harder to keep away from Lan Zhan, he would have never been at that temple, and Su She would never have stabbed him. A-Yuan would never have been captured, would never have had a knife threaten to rip out his *eyes*. Lan Zhan and A-Yuan would have been together, and safe, and they *had* been, but Wei Wuxian returned.

Once again, Wei Wuxian had endangered the lives of those he loved the most. This time, he knew he wouldn't survive it. But he couldn't let himself break, not yet – he had to protect the juniors, for as long as he could. Even if he was beyond broken – even if he was sure this must be how it felt for your soul to shatter.

The guilt and anguish, ripping through every part of him like stray dogs tearing at fresh meat, the exhaustion that threatened to drag him into a sleep that lasted forever, the fear kept his mind sharp, and awake. His heart, broken and mangled in his chest, still echoing to the rhythm of *Lan Zhan, Lan Zhan, Lan Zhan* –

Lan Zhan.

He wanted to hold him, to pull Lan Zhan against his chest and whisper to him until he woke, he wanted to feel his heartbeat beneath his fingertips. He wanted to press kisses into his hair, to tell him how much he loved him, how much he *needed* him, to beg him to just hold on, to wake up, to please, *please* just be okay.

But he couldn't. Because if he looked back at Lan Zhan, if he took his hand again, Wei Wuxian's cracking composure would shatter completely, and he would be of no use to anyone. He would fail them all. In all likelihood, he would fail them again, anyway.

Just like he had failed Shijie, and Jiang-shushu, and Yu-furen.

He stiffened.

His eyes widened.

*Unless* –

It wouldn't save all of them, but maybe, just maybe, he could get the four younger ones out of there.

And maybe, *maybe*, they could fix all of this.

The distant sound of Jiang-shushu's voice murmured in his mind a phrase that had defined him forever – a phrase he had lost all right to sixteen years ago.

*Attempt the impossible.*

He would try. He had to try.

Wei Wuxian pulled the paper Huaisang had given him from his pocket, and the stick of charcoal from his sleeve, writing over his own scribbled notes. The spellwork, the steps, the array – he had to remember it, *had* to – he'd written it out so many times, back in the Burial Mounds. He knew he must look like a man possessed, scribbling the same patterns over and over and over again, until at last he was certain he'd got them right. Not even Zizhen had the energy to ask what he was doing, and by the time he was done, only Jiang Cheng was still awake. Stubborn as ever, he was keeping watch on the door, even with his eyes half-closed. His hand was running absently over Jin Ling's hair. The boy had fallen asleep sprawled in his

uncle's lap, but when Wei Wuxian looked over, he saw his nephew's face twisted in fear. A nightmare perhaps, or a memory of the day that had passed.

Wei Wuxian's resolve tightened. He stood up, stretching his aching muscles out for a moment, and then – taking care not to look at Lan Zhan's face – he reached out to Zewu Jun, shaking his shoulder gently.

At once, Lan Xichen's eyes opened, glassy and hollow, but aware, and Wei Wuxian put a finger to his lips. Lan Xichen nodded slightly, and Jiang Cheng leant forward, his eyes widening.

“You have something?” he murmured.

Wei Wuxian nodded, hesitating for a moment.

“There's a ‘but,’” Jiang Cheng added impatiently, though mercifully he kept his voice quiet.

“Yes. We couldn't all go, and there would be... consequences.”

Zewu Jun just blinked, and Jiang Cheng narrowed his eyes, studying Wei Wuxian for a long moment. “It would get the juniors out, wouldn't it? Leave the rest of us here?” Jiang Cheng waited for his nod, and then looked down at Jin Ling. His jaw tightened, and he gave a nod of his own. “How do we do it?”

Wei Wuxian took a deep breath. “When I was in the Burial Mounds, the second time, I – I had a project,” he said carefully, but Jiang Cheng still winced, and his own voice began to tremble. “I wanted to go back to Lotus Pier, to before... I wanted to stop it from ever happening. There was a book, in the Demon Subdue Palace, that had a theory, and I fleshed it out, but – but I couldn't do it.” He closed his eyes. He didn't want to see Jiang Cheng's face when he said the next bit. “I didn't have a golden core, and resentful energy is too unstable. And the spell – it requires a sacrifice, one that can't be completed by the one going back. I couldn't make someone else do that. It also requires a lot of power. The Stygian Tiger Amulet might've made it possible, but if it went wrong, it would've blown up the Burial Mounds, and everyone... everyone there would've...”

“What are you saying?” Jiang Cheng asked slowly, but the mingling dread and hope on his face made Wei Wuxian suspect his once-brother knew *exactly* what he was getting at.

“I'm saying that we can't send them out of here – but I know how to send them back in time. It's not like travelling from one place to another – they would never be able to come back, because there would be nothing to come back *to*. Everything that has happened since the moment they returned to would cease to exist – it would be a memory they shared, and nothing more. But they wouldn't be here, and – and the future would be theirs to shape. They could change this, all of this – they could stop Jin Guangyao from ever getting so far out of hand...”

Zewu Jun was staring at him unblinking, his mouth ajar, but Jiang Cheng's face was a frown of thought, and after a moment he looked up.



“How far back can you send them?”

“No further than sixteen years,” said Wei Wuxian. “I wouldn’t – I don’t know for certain, but I think – I think if we sent them back to before they were born, it could kill them.”

Jiang Cheng paled slightly, his hand resting on Jin Ling’s shoulder. “Then it has to be in that month,” he said urgently. “Between when Jin Ling was born and before you – before you...”

A chill ran down Wei Wuxian’s spine and he nodded. “Yes.” Steeling himself, he looked at Lan Xichen. “Zewu Jun, I know... I know it seems like we’re risking the lives of so many – there are so many people who might not be born, or who might die sooner than they did this time, but-”

“If this can be stopped, it should be,” Zewu Jun whispered. “If you do as he says the world will be at his mercy. He won’t spare Jingyi, or Zizhen, or Sizhui. I don’t – I don’t know that he would even spare Jin Ling. But if they... if they can have a chance to live, we should take it. Especially if that means we will never be here, that Wangji –” He broke off, squeezing his eyes shut, and for moment, Wei Wuxian couldn’t breathe. If he breathed, he would sob, and if he sobbed then he would break, and they still needed him.

But it didn’t make anything easier to know that Zewu Jun didn’t want to live in a world without Lan Zhan any more than he did.

“How’s it done?” Jiang Cheng demanded, and Wei Wuxian took a deep breath.

When he had finished explaining the procedure, Jiang Cheng looked faintly like he was going to be sick. Still, when he spoke, his voice was firm. “I will send Jin Ling back.”

Wei Wuxian’s heart twisted. Taking on the ritual himself was one thing, and he knew he wouldn’t be able to send all four boys back on his own, but hearing the determination in his once-brother’s voice hurt fiercely. “Jiang Cheng –”

“I will send back Jingyi,” said Zewu Jun softly, looking up. “But we’re one short.”

“No,” said a voice in the corner, and all three of them jumped. Wei Wuxian was sure he wasn’t the only one who’d assumed Huaisang was still sleeping. “There are four of us. I can send Ouyang Zizhen back, assuming Wei-xiong is going to send back Lan Sizhui.”

“Nie-xiong,” Wei Wuxian murmured. “Did you hear it all? Everything?”

“Yes,” Huaisang said stubbornly. “I did. I may be a coward, but – but I’m not useless. And you’re right. They don’t deserve to be here.”

Swallowing, Wei Wuxian nodded, and Huaisang nodded back, his eyes glistening with tears.

“It sounds like you need the amulet for this to work,” he said, sniffing. “Do you know how you’re going to get it?”

“If I tell Jin Guangyao I need it to cast the curse on the other clan leaders... I’m working on it. But if we’re in agreement that we’re doing this – or at least *trying*, we should wake them

up. Explain everything while we still have a chance to.” He paused. “Although...”

“They don’t need to know how it works,” said Jiang Cheng sharply. “Not until the last moment. They’ll fight us, otherwise.”

Wei Wuxian and the others nodded, and Jiang Cheng lowered his head, shaking Jin Ling’s shoulder gently. “A-Ling, wake up...” As Lan Xichen woke Sizhui just as gently, Wei Wuxian crouched at Zizhen’s side.

“Ouyang-gongzi,” he said softly, but the boy still woke with a gasp, jumping as though Wei Wuxian had slapped him. “Hey, hey, it’s alright. Breathe. It’s alright...”

“Wei-qianbei,” he breathed, propping himself up on his elbows. “What’s going on?”

“We have a plan,” said Wei Wuxian, squeezing Zizhen’s wrist. At once, the boy’s eyes lit up, so hopeful and trusting it hurt to see.

“A plan?”

Wei Wuxian nodded. “As soon as everyone’s awake, I’ll tell you, okay?” Zizhen nodded eagerly, and Wei Wuxian moved to the cell door, calling out quietly. “Jingyi – wake up!”

Much like Zizhen, Jingyi jumped as he woke, but the movement made him wince, and as he blinked away sleep, his eyes were misted with pain. “Wei-qianbei?”

“How is your back?”

Jingyi gave a little smile. “I’ll be okay,” he said bravely. “What’s going on?”

“We have a plan,” said Wei Wuxian.

“A plan?” Jin Ling repeated, grabbing Jiang Cheng’s arm. “Jiujiu, are we escaping?”

Wei Wuxian’s heart sunk as Jiang Cheng’s face tightened, and then softened into a sad smile as he spoke. “You are escaping. The four of you.”

Jin Ling’s eyes widened, and he shook his head slightly, looking from Jiang Cheng to Wei Wuxian and back again, and Sizhui sat forward.

“Jiang-zongzhu, we can’t –”

“It’s okay, Sizhui,” Wei Wuxian said, but Sizhui shook his head desperately, clambering to his feet and grabbing Wei Wuxian’s sleeve.

“We can’t, we can’t leave you here, we can’t – we’ve got to go together, please –”

Memory bombarded his mind with images of boat and the stricken faces of Yu-furen and Jiang-shushu, and he could almost feel the Zidian tight around his chest, binding him to Jiang Cheng and Shijie as they begged and pleaded and wailed –

Steeling himself, Wei Wuxian shoved the pain to the back of his mind, and took Sizhui's shoulders. "A-Yuan, listen to me," he said. "You *can* leave, and you will – but you can save us, too –"

"No – no!" Tears poured down Sizhui's cheeks, and he shook his head even faster. "They'll kill you, as soon as they know we're gone they'll kill all of you, and –"

"No, they won't," Wei Wuxian promised, brushing the tears away with his thumb. "They won't. Because we won't be here anymore. We're going to send you back in time, to before any of this ever happened. This – all of this – it'll be nothing more than a bad memory, it'll be gone – and if we're lucky, you'll be able to stop all of it. If you can't – well, you'll get to live, in any case, and that will be worth it."

"B-back?" Jin Ling stuttered. "Back in *time*?"

"You're crazy," breathed Jingyi. "I thought, and then I didn't, but – but no, Wei-qianbei, that's *impossible* – it –"

"Listen to me, all of you," Wei Wuxian said sharply, fixing his gaze on each of the juniors in turn. "We don't have any other choice. There's no other way to send you through the wards, no other way to escape. If you stay here, you will die." All four of the boys flinched at that, but as much as he wanted to, Wei Wuxian couldn't stop. They had to understand. They had to be willing to go back. They had to. "Perhaps I'll find a curse powerful enough to kill every clan leader outside this room – not forgetting that includes Zizhen's father – and perhaps I'll find a way to really wipe weeks from someone's memory, but Jin Guangyao's too smart and too far gone to take any risk he doesn't think will pay off. Zewu Jun will be spared, perhaps Jin Ling and Huaisang for nostalgia's sake, but I don't think the rest of us will be that lucky. Even if we are, if you stay, there is no way that Jin Guangyao will not win. If you go back, there's every chance he won't."

Zizhen nodded slowly, but his voice was trembling. "So – so we go back to, say, last week..."

To Wei Wuxian's relief, Jiang Cheng took over. "No. Last week isn't safe, which would defeat the purpose of sending you back. You're going back as far as we can send you – to the year Jin Ling was born. That way, maybe you can stop that madness, too."

"The year – you mean you're sending us back when, when Wei Wuxian – when Nightless City..." Jingyi stared incredulously at Jiang Cheng. "How is that any safer than *last week*?"

"We're not aiming to send you back to Nightless City," said Jiang Cheng sharply. "Before then. If possible, before –" He broke off, glancing at Jin Ling, who was staring at his uncle with the widest eyes Wei Wuxian had ever seen. Jiang Cheng took a deep breath, and adjusted Jin Ling's ponytail. "Before Su She killed your father. If we can."

Jin Ling didn't say anything. Wei Wuxian wasn't even sure that the boy was breathing. Before he could speak to his nephew, though, Sizhui gave a hitched breath, almost like a sob, and Wei Wuxian looked back at him.

"Will – will we – I was – how can we stop anything if we're, if we're so small?"

“You won’t be,” Wei Wuxian paused. “The theory is complicated, but in essence... We’d be turning back time around you - sending back your body, and your soul, as you are now. When you arrive in the past, the connection between you and your past self will break – you will be two separate people. Your soul will remain as it is now – theirs will grow according to the life they lead. It may end up being almost identical, but it won’t be the same – think of it like having a twin, who just... happens to be sixteen years younger than you.”

In any other situation, Wei Wuxian would have found the bewildered, baffled faces of Zizhen, Jin Ling, and Jingyi to be utterly hilarious. But among the confusion and shock on Sizhui’s face was terror, open and honest, and he was so young...

They were so young.

*That’s why this is the right thing to do.*

“You’re going to be okay,” he promised, smoothing Sizhui’s hair back. “You’re going to be just fine. When you get there, find out what day it is. If it’s before Jin Ling’s one-month celebration, come and find me, and tell me everything. If it’s after-” Sizhui flinched violently, and Jin Ling clutched at Jiang Cheng’s arm, and Wei Wuxian forced himself to smile. “If it’s after, then it’s not your fault, and it’s not your job to change it. If it’s after, go and find Huaisang.”

“Nie-zongzhu?” Jin Ling burst out, looking warily at Huaisang, and Wei Wuxian nodded.

“Jiang Cheng will be grieving, and Lan Zhan –” he broke off, trying not to think of what Zewu Jun had told him about those first three years. The lashes Lan Zhan had taken for him, the – “Gusu will be otherwise occupied. Find Huaisang first – he’s smart enough to know you’re telling the truth, and he’ll figure something out.”

Sizhui hung his head and shivered, and Wei Wuxian swallowed.

“A-Yuan... it’s going to be okay.”

“No one – no one will remember us, will they?” Sizhui said softly, refusing to meet Wei Wuxian’s eye. “No one will know us.”

Wei Wuxian sighed. “No. No, they won’t. You will have to keep it a secret, where you came from, from everyone outside this room – except maybe your immediate family, if they can be trusted not to talk...” he tried not to cast a look at Zizhen as he said that. As much as he loved the boy, he could only just about tolerate Ouyang-zongzhu. Barely. On a good day.

“Otherwise you will be in danger. And others might try to recreate the ritual. I don’t know that anyone could manage, especially without the amulet, but failing could have consequences, too. It won’t be easy for you, and I’m sorry. But you will be alive, and you can learn from our mistakes. It will be hard, but you will be okay.” He hoped that saying it enough times would make Sizhui and the others believe it, would let him believe it himself. “It’s going to be okay, A-Yuan. You’re going to be okay.”

Sizhui didn’t look at him. “If everything could be fixed, why don’t we send *you* back?”

Wei Wuxian tried not to flinch at the thought of the four juniors undertaking that particular role of the ritual. It was bad enough knowing that Jiang Cheng, Huaisang, and Zewu Jun would have to do it.

“No,” he said firmly. “For one thing, I’m the only one who completely understands the ritual. If I don’t lead it, it’s more likely to go wrong. More importantly, if we went back everyone would recognise us – we wouldn’t be able to pretend we were someone else. It has to be you.”

“But you’d know better how to fix it,” protested Zizhen quietly.

“Make him tell me,” said Jiang Cheng, and Wei Wuxian’s stomach twisted.

“What?” Jin Ling asked, and Jiang Cheng nodded, fixing Wei Wuxian in a stare which held all the strength of iron, even as his voice trembled.

“Make him tell me about... about his golden core.”

Wei Wuxian winced. “Jiang Cheng-”

But Jiang Cheng looked up at him with such determination and anger and *anguish* that Wei Wuxian fell silent. “I don’t want to find out from Wen Ning, or Jin Guangyao. I want *you* to tell me, I – I don’t want... But that’s not the point. It’s not about what I want.”

“It’s context,” Huaisang said hollowly, and Jiang Cheng nodded.

“Jin Guangyao... if he was right, and I could’ve stopped all of this by just *trusting* you, I –” he broke off and flinched, physically flinched, and Wei Wuxian felt his heart break even further.

“Jiang Cheng, it wasn’t your fault,” he murmured.

“Parts of it were,” said Jiang Cheng, but he didn’t sound stubborn. Just tired, and very, very sad. “Parts weren’t. But I couldn’t – I couldn’t trust you like I wanted to because you didn’t *talk* to me, you didn’t tell me anything, and I didn’t understand. I needed to understand why you – why you left –”

*Me.*

The word was unspoken, but Wei Wuxian heard it screaming in his ear, and he closed his eyes. “Okay,” he whispered. “Okay, Jiang Cheng.”

“So you make sure you make him tell me,” snapped Jiang Cheng, and it wasn’t hard to imagine the way he was glaring at the juniors. “But not in public! Not in public, thank you very much. It’s not something the whole world needs to know.”

Wei Wuxian opened his eyes to see the juniors nodding sombrely.

“We won’t tell the secret ourselves,” Zizhen promised.

“If you can,” said Huaisang slowly, “please tell me to ask my brother about the sabres. If... if we really can undo this, Da-ge...”

“What about the sabres?” asked Jingyi, frowning, but they didn’t have time.

“It’s not important right now – it’s a very long story,” said Wei Wuxian. “But Huaisang’s right – and when Huaisang knows, make him tell *me*. If I can help, I will.”

Huaisang looked up at him, surprise glistening among the tears in his eyes, and Wei Wuxian smiled sadly. Drawing in a deep breath, Huaisang stood up, bowing low.

“Thank you, Wei-xiong.”

Wei Wuxian bowed his head, and then glanced over the juniors. There was a steely resolution in Jingyi’s eyes, and Zizhen’s jaw was set, but Jin Ling looked younger than ever, leaning more and more against Jiang Cheng’s side by the moment, and Sizhui...

“A-Yuan,” he murmured, and Sizhui finally looked up at him. Wei Wuxian wondered how he hadn’t noticed before – how he had never recognised those wide eyes. “Do you understand why we’re doing this?” Slowly, very slowly, Sizhui nodded, and Wei Wuxian smiled as best he could. “Good. I – A-Yuan, I...” He shook his head slightly, and then surrendered, pulling the boy into a tight hug. At once, Sizhui hugged him back, clinging to him painfully tight, and burying his head in Wei Wuxian’s shoulder. “It’s going to be okay,” he whispered. “You’re going to be fine, and you’re going to get back, and Lan Zhan’s going to be there, and he’ll be fine. And you’ll be fine. I promise.”

Sizhui shuddered, nestling closer. “I – I – if you’re not there –”

“Then I’m not there,” he said quietly. “But I... I loved you then, A-Yuan, and I love you now, and I always will. No matter where I am, whether I’m dead or alive or a demon. Always.”

Sizhui keened, pulling closer to him, and Wei Wuxian swallowed.

“Come with us! Please, please come with us!”

“I can’t,” he breathed. “I’m sorry.” He lingered there for a moment, resting his face on Sizhui’s head, holding him as close as he dared, but then he had to take a deep breath, and ignore every instinct in his body, and push his son away. “Okay,” he said sharply. “Here’s what we need to do.”

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!

# Chapter 4

## Chapter Notes

As far as I'm aware, in canon we never find out Jingyi's birth name, so for the sake of this story his name is Lan Yu, courtesy name Jingyi.

Additionally, I think in the novel it's alluded to Ouyang Zizhen being an only child, but for purposes related to both my head canon for him and (much) later aspects of the story I've made him a middle child among five siblings. His siblings won't really show up much (or if they do not for a long time) but in the context of this story they exist. In terms of Zizhen's birth name, I have got one set aside for him but it won't come up for quite a while.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The morning came far too soon. When the sound of the bolts on the door dragged Sizhui out of a haze of a half-sleep his first thought was one of sharp dread.

He wasn't ready. It was too soon – he wasn't ready – he wasn't ready to say goodbye, to go – Even if his uncle and Wei Wuxian had already said their own goodbyes the night before.

"I'm so sorry, A-Yuan," Lan Xichen had breathed, holding him close, and Sizhui had choked because barring the last few days, his uncle hadn't called him A-Yuan since he was five years old, "For all, all of this. But I'm proud of you. So, so proud. And – and so is your father. He's the only one prouder of you than I am, and he loves you, so much. You're the best of all of us, A-Yuan."

A few minutes later, Lan Xichen had let him go, and Wei Wuxian had pinched his cheeks, pulling a strained smile onto his own face. "You really are a good boy, A-Yuan. And you're going to be okay. I love you – remember that."

And Sizhui would, Sizhui would remember, but when they went back Wei Wuxian might not – or he might already be dead, and if he was there would be no second chance with Mo Xuanyu, not this time – and even as these thoughts attacked him, Wei Wuxian had pulled him close, murmuring gently into his hair and rocking him as though he was a toddler again.

And then Wei Wuxian had stepped back, and gone over to talk quietly to Zizhen, and Xichen had eased Hanguang Jun out of his arms, laying him in Sizhui's lap. He'd turned away, afterwards, everyone had, offering what little privacy they could. For a moment, Sizhui hadn't been able to speak at all. His father was so completely still, his face blank in a way it had never been before, no matter how many times people said Hanguang Jun was expressionless.

Eventually, Sizhui had bowed down until his head was almost touching his father's. His voice was little more than a whisper, but it didn't matter. In all likelihood, his father wouldn't hear him – not even if he screamed.

"I'm sorry, Baba, I'm sorry. I don't want to go, I don't want to leave you, but I – I can't help otherwise. I'm sorry. I love you, Baba. I love you, I love you, I love you."

There had been more he wanted to say, but tears had strangled him, and eventually he sat up to see that one had fallen onto his father's cheek, so that it looked like Hanguang Jun was crying too. Wei Wuxian had come back to sit next to them, wiping first Hanguang Jun's cheek and then Sizhui's, and Sizhui had slumped against his shoulder, and breathed a little easier when his uncle sat at his other side.

Now, the door was opening, and Jingyi was bracing himself, and it was time, and –

"Breathe, Sizhui," Lan Xichen murmured, squeezing his hand, and Sizhui nodded. He couldn't show he was any more afraid than he had been before.

Jin Guangyao didn't visit that morning. Instead, it was a nameless guard that passed Wei Wuxian his notes from the days before, and to Sizhui's horror it was none other than Su She that grabbed Jingyi by the scruff of the neck and pulled him to his feet.

"I know, I know, I'm up!" Jingyi snapped, glaring at the man, but Su She just smirked, and shoved him out of the chamber. Sizhui's breath caught in his throat as his friend disappeared, his heart picking up speed. It was harder to watch every time they took Jingyi away, but Wei Wuxian said they had to let him be taken today.

"I wasn't ready yesterday," he'd said, bowing low to Jingyi. "He might know there's something wrong if I declare a solution first thing in the morning. I'm sorry."

But Jingyi had raised his chin and given a small smile, and promised, "I'll be okay, Wei-qianbei. I trust you."

The morning was spent with Wei Wuxian writing so fast it was a wonder his notes weren't entirely smudged, until finally, with ink on his fingers and grit in his eye, he stood up.

"Hey!" he snapped, and the guards looked at him. "Go tell your master I've done it – I've made his stupid curse."

The guards shared a look, and then one knocked three times on the door. It opened, and the guard disappeared outside. The other remained behind, watching them intently, and Sizhui's throat began to feel very dry.

Several minutes later, the door opened again, and Jin Guangyao stepped inside, Su She at his shoulder.

"Where's Jingyi?" Wei Wuxian asked.

"Where is the curse?" Jin Guangyao replied, and Wei Wuxian thrust out his notes. Snatching them, Su She rifled through the sheets of paper before passing them to Jin Guangyao with a



short bow. The man's face was tight as he read them, but slowly, a smile spread over his face.

"Yes," he breathed. "This –"

"Good luck with it," said Wei Wuxian sharply. "Now bring Jingyi back."

Jin Guangyao blinked, his eyes looking so doe-like and innocent that Sizhui felt sick. "Oh? But you haven't filled your end of the deal yet."

"You want me to carry out the curse as well as write it?" Wei Wuxian scoffed. "You have cultivators in your guard. They can do it."

"This curse will take eight cultivators to cast," said Jin Guangyao sweetly. "And you haven't detailed what the backlash will be."

Wei Wuxian shifted uncomfortably, and Sizhui swallowed, his heart picking up speed. Lying was forbidden, so Sizhui didn't have any practise with it, and even though Wei Wuxian did, so did Jin Guangyao. If he saw that it was a bluff, if he realised that Wei Wuxian *wanted* to cast the 'curse' with the help of the rest of them, he would kill Jingyi.

"I don't know," admitted Wei Wuxian.

"Then wouldn't it be best if you undertook this task yourself? I think that would be safer," said Jin Guangyao pleasantly.

"I need eight cultivators," snapped Wei Wuxian. "Lan Zhan can't –"

"You will have eight," said Jin Guangyao, waving his hand lazily. There was a beat, and then Jingyi was shoved through the door into the chamber. A guard was gripping the back of his neck, but Sizhui couldn't see any new bruises on his face, and Jingyi was scowling so furiously he couldn't be too badly hurt. "Lan Jingyi will help you. But I can't have you all in the same cage – I have to take precautions, you understand. Until the curse is cast, Er-ge, I'm afraid you must let me care for Wangji."

Sizhui gasped, arms tightening around his father as Lan Xichen went very pale. "A-Yao–"

"Wei Wuxian would never hurt Lan Wangji, would he?" Jin Guangyao crooned, and Sizhui saw Wei Wuxian's hands clench into fists. "And surely he knows better than to try to trick me. But it's better safe than sorry. Please, Er-ge, cooperate – you don't want to make me hurt Lan Jingyi, do you?"

"Bobo," Sizhui begged hopelessly, not knowing what he was asking or what Lan Xichen could do, but begging all the same because Wei Wuxian had told him through bitter tears to react exactly as he would if he didn't already know that Jin Guangyao would demand to take his father away.

Su She scoffed, and pulled a knife from his belt, taking a step towards Jingyi. Sizhui's stomach twisted.

"Don't," croaked Lan Xichen, closing his eyes. "I – I won't fight. Don't hurt him."

“Good.”

The cell door slid open, and one of the guards strode inside, lifting Hanguang Jun up from the floor and away from Sizhui, and it *hurt*. He stood up, almost unconsciously, but Lan Xichen’s hand on his arm kept him in place, even as the guard carrying his father stepped out of the cell to stand beside Su She. Hanguang Jun’s head was lolling back over the guard’s arm, his neck arched back, exposed, and there was a dark glee in Su She’s eyes.

Jingyi was thrown roughly into the cell, and even before the door slammed shut behind him Sizhui was there.

“*Jingyi!*” He grabbed his friend’s arm tightly, and Jingyi leant into him, resting his forehead against Sizhui’s shoulder. He was shivering lightly, and Sizhui caught sight of a flash of red on his back.

“This is not the time for reunions,” said Jin Guangyao lightly. “Complete the ritual. Now.”

“But – but Wei-qianbei, you can’t!” Zizhen choked, his eyes full of tears Sizhui was sure were not hard to call. “My – my father –”

Wei Wuxian turned around sympathetically. “I’m sorry, Zizhen, but-”

Jin Guangyao stepped forward, still smiling. “But if you don’t help cast this curse, or you try to sabotage it, you’ll beg for death for days before I grant it. And I will have to take your defiance as a sign of the lack of obedience in the children of Ouyang-zongzhu, and see to it that your brother and your sisters are butchered, too.”

Zizhen choked, flinching away from the cell door, and Wei Wuxian put a hand on his shoulder, glaring at Jin Guangyao. “It’s going to be okay,” he muttered, and Zizhen closed his eyes, shuddering. Eyes ablaze, Wei Wuxian strode to the cell door and stuck a hand out through the bars. “I need paint.”

One of the guards obliged, and Wei Wuxian ushered the others back towards the sides of the cell. Sizhui found himself wedged between his uncle and Jingyi, and he couldn’t help but cling to both of their hands like a child. Opposite him, Jin Ling was pressed against Jiang-zongzhu’s side, but he was also holding Zizhen’s wrist, looking nervously at the older boy as though he wasn’t sure quite how to comfort him. Zizhen was looking down at the floor, his eyes glazed over, his face as pale as Hanguang Jun’s. Sizhui swallowed.

The array that Wei Wuxian was painting was complex, more complex than any Sizhui had ever seen before. He didn’t know how much of it was intricacies added to make it look more like a curse than a portal, or how much was necessary for the spell itself. He had no idea how Wei Wuxian had memorised it. Its outer edge was an octagon, and within it was a wide circle. A smaller circle was in its centre, and around the edges of that circle were four symbols that Sizhui didn’t recognise.

Finally, Wei Wuxian stepped back, and took a deep breath. “Sizhui, come and sit here,” he said, beckoning Sizhui to one of the four symbols.

Sizhui sat down obediently. He was facing the cell door, so he could still keep an eye on his father, and he was grateful – even if the sight of Hanguang Jun so vulnerable, so close to Su She, made him sick. Wei Wuxian manoeuvred Zizhen into the symbol to his right, also opposite the cell door, and they were close enough that their knees touched. Jin Ling was placed similarly close on Zizhen's other side, and Jingyi was guided to Sizhui's, completing their little circle. Behind Sizhui's head, he heard the shuffle of paper.

"Show me the talismans," said Jin Guangyao sharply, and Wei Wuxian obliged, returning a moment later to place the two pieces of paper into the centre of the circle. On one was a symbol of protection, and the names of everyone in the room – including Jin Guangyao and Su She. On the other was a symbol of death, and bore the names of the other clan leaders, and several of their heirs.

Sizhui shuddered.

"Right," said Wei Wuxian grimly. "You four will be providing the energy we need to make this work, but I can help focus your qi. Sizhui, your hand?" Sizhui held up his hand, and Wei Wuxian rolled back his sleeves gently, painting characters on the inside of Sizhui's wrist. It almost tickled, but when he was allowed to lower his arm down again, a lump grew in his throat.

*Wei Ying Wuxian Lan Yuan Sizhui*

Wei Wuxian smoothed Sizhui's hair back and moved onto Jingyi, painting his wrist, too, and ruffling his hair before he moved onto Zizhen. He squeezed Zizhen's shoulder before he moved onto Jin Ling, and when Jin Ling's wrist was painted too, he squeezed the youngest boy's hand for a moment.

To Jin Guangyao, it must look like a moment of comfort, but Sizhui knew that it was goodbye, and he could barely breathe.

"Hold hands," Wei Wuxian ordered them, and they obeyed. Then, Wei Wuxian turned to Jin Guangyao. "Now – I need the amulet, the key to these chains, and I need four knives. If we don't get the timing exactly right, this could blow up in our face – and I mean that literally."

Jin Guangyao's eyes hardened, and he inclined his head slowly.

And Su She smirked, and flicked out his arm, pushing the tip of a knife into the side of Hanguang Jun's neck. Sizhui's heart stopped, and Wei Wuxian flinched.

"A-Yao," Lan Xichen begged, and Jin Guangyao looked sympathetically at him.

"Don't worry, Er-ge," he said. "As long as you complete the ritual properly, Wangji will be fine. In the meantime, I need to maintain an upper hand, if I'm going to give you the amulet."

It looked, for a moment, like Zewu Jun's nerve was going to break. His hands were reaching out towards Hanguang Jun, and when he looked at Wei Wuxian it was with suspicion and dread, but then he bowed his head, and turned away. Sizhui took a deep breath.

The guards delivered the key, first, and Wei Wuxian released the chains from around their wrists. As soon as they fell away, Sizhui felt relief flood through him, carried by the spiritual energy that was at last allowed to circulate his whole body properly. His wrists felt oddly light without the shackles.

Then, the guards delivered the knives. Wei Wuxian took one, and passed the others to Lan Xichen, Jiang Wanyin, and Nie Huaisang. Nie Huaisang's hand trembled as he took it.

And then, Jin Guangyao passed Wei Wuxian the Stygian Tiger Amulet.

Sizhui felt like he was going to be sick. Opposite him, Jin Ling had started to tremble, and Jingyi was grappling at Sizhui's hand. Zizhen was utterly motionless, as though he was afraid even twitching would bring attention to him. Very carefully, Wei Wuxian placed the amulet in the centre of the circle, on top of the two talismans, and Sizhui tried not to flinch away from it.

He watched Wei Wuxian paint a talisman onto the front of Jiang Cheng's robes, and then Xichen's, and then Nie Huaisang's. Nie Huaisang took the brush then, painting same talisman onto Wei Wuxian's chest.

When it was complete, Wei Wuxian nodded. "Right – Sizhui, Jin Ling, Jingyi, Zizhen – I need you to focus all your energy on the array. When I say, let go of each other and pour as much energy into the talismans as you can." Sizhui steeled himself. He knew that Wei Wuxian wasn't going to say it – he'd told them several times not to let go of each other's hands.

"No matter what happens," he had said fiercely, "you keep a hold of each other. If you let go, you might end up getting separated – the spell will try and send you back to where you were at the time you land in. If you hang onto each other, hopefully you'll end up somewhere in the middle. If you end up in different places, that's not the end of the world, but if you end up in different times you could die. Do not, under any circumstances, let go of each other, not until you arrive."

This was starting to feel more and more like a terrible idea.

Not that it had ever felt like a good one.

Wei Wuxian took a deep breath, standing behind Sizhui. "Jiang Cheng, Nie-xiong, Zewu Jun – I'm going to use the amulet to power the array until it's strong enough to fully activate – when I stop whistling, cut your palm and slam your hand into the array straight away, okay?"

The others nodded, moving to stand behind Jingyi, Jin Ling, and Zizhen, and then, Wei Wuxian began to whistle. The amulet shifted, rocking slightly, and then it began to rise, and Sizhui's heart raced desperately, as though it was trying to escape his chest, escape this nightmare.

The thick, black smoke of resentful energy began to swirl around the amulet, and Sizhui fought not to choke on the scent of sulphur. He saw Jiang Cheng's knee nudge into Jin Ling's back, saw Jin Ling squeeze his eyes shut. The amulet rose higher, and began to spin, faster

and faster, and power surged around them, so intense that Sizhui felt the hair on his arms and neck stand on end, and Jingyi's grip on his hand grew painfully tight.

The whistling grew higher, quicker, and the amulet spun faster –

And then the whistling stopped, and the amulet froze.

And Sizhui looked up over his shoulder at Wei Wuxian – just in time to see the man plunge the knife deep into his own chest. Pain ripped through Sizhui so fiercely for a moment he thought he must have been stabbed too, and he barely heard the wail he let out as Wei Wuxian fell to his knees, a small, sad smile on his face. His eyes met Sizhui's, but then they glazed over, and he slumped backwards, and by the time Wei Wuxian's head hit the floor, his eyes were empty.

*"Jiujiu!"* Jin Ling was screaming hysterically, and Sizhui heard Jingyi choke out the younger boy's name, and he tore his eyes from Wei Wuxian, looking back around –

And Jiang Wanyin was lying behind Jin Ling, his eyes closed and his hand still around the knife in his chest, and Nie Huaisang was slumped motionless behind Zizhen, a sea of blood growing around him –

And behind Jingyi, Lan Xichen was swaying on his knees, his eyes fluttering closed, and then he wrenched the knife back out of his heart, and he fell, hitting the floor with a thud, and Sizhui couldn't *breathe* -

*"Er-ge!"* The shriek of Jin Guangyao pierced through Sizhui's soul, and he looked up at the cell door –

And he saw Jin Guangyao's robes covered in blood.

And he saw –

He saw –

*"Baba!"* he screamed, but he knew his father couldn't hear him, he knew because Su She had cut his father's throat and soaked Jin Guangyao in Hanguang Jun's lifeblood, and Baba was dead, he was *dead*, and Wei Wuxian was dead and Bobo was dead and Jiang Wanyin was dead and Nie Huaisang was dead and it had *failed*, it had failed because they weren't going anywhere, they weren't moving, and Jin Guangyao was tearing his way into the cell –

*"Jiujiu, Jiujiu, Jiujiu!"* Jin Ling was still screaming.

"Jin Ling!" Jingyi choked again, and with a start of fear, Sizhui realised that the younger boy had let go of Jingyi's hand to reach for Jiang Cheng, and Jingyi was trying to reach for him, leaning away from Sizhui –

And then something tugged at Sizhui's golden core –

And the array glowed blood red –

And then Sizhui was pulled into darkness, and Jingyi's hand was ripped from his own.

---

Jingyi was completely and utterly enveloped in darkness. Like a pool of deep, frigid water it tightened around him, crushing in on him so fiercely he was sure that every vein in his body was bursting. The pain seared through every single part of him, and Jingyi knew that Wei-qianbei had got it wrong, very wrong, because this had to be dying. Jingyi knew he was dying.

Just like Wei-qianbei and Zewu Jun, and –

Sizhui – he'd been torn away from Sizhui when they first fell into the darkness. He could only hope that Sizhui and the others would land, that they'd make it, and be okay, and fix everything. If Jingyi was the only one to die, that – that would be okay. But if Sizhui and Zizhen and Jin Ling were dead, then it was all for nothing.

They would all be dead for nothing.

Vaguely, beyond the pain, he became aware of a hand clenched around the back of his collar. The last thing he'd felt before the world disappeared was the nails clawing against the back of his neck as someone grabbed at him, and he knew that this was whoever had dragged him away from Sizhui.

Well. If Jingyi was dying in this darkness, he would much rather die alone than dangling from the grip of an enemy. It was hard, moving his limbs – the pressure around him was so intense that it was like pushing them through honey. His hand closed around the fist clutching his collar, and he grabbed the stranger's thumb, wrenching it back. He felt the bone break beneath his fingers, but there was no sound. The hand released him.

Then the pressure broke.

Suddenly, Jingyi was falling, and his ears were popping, and his stomach was churning –

And then he landed on his back, and the lash wounds *screamed*. Jingyi didn't scream. It felt like his lungs were empty, and he was too stunned to move, even to open his eyes. He was alive. He wasn't dead.

But the memories flashed before his eyes, feverishly bright – Wei Wuxian plunging the knife into his chest and twisting it, the clan leaders doing the same, Zewu Jun's soft cry of pain as he stabbed himself *right behind Jingyi*. The utter horror of knowing they had all aimed for the heart, of knowing that they all *intended* to die – the sound of Jin Ling's screaming. He hadn't been surprised that Jin Ling let go of his hand, that he tried to grapple for his uncle. The last few weeks had made Jingyi painfully aware that without Jin Guangyao, Jiang Wanyin was all the family Jin Ling knew.

He could only hope that Zizhen had kept a better grip on Jin Ling, that the others were safe, and together. That if they weren't here, they were at least *somewhere*, that they hadn't died in that darkness.

Jingyi took a deep breath. The air was cold – very cold, and he opened his eyes. Above him was the night sky, framed by tall trees, and he raised his head, wincing as the movement tugged at the lash marks on his back.

His heart skipped a beat.

He was home. He was *home* – he was on a path in the forest, but he *knew* it, he was in Cloud Recess, he was home, and Jingyi sobbed.

He had been sure, so, so sure, that he would never see his home again. He took another deep breath, letting the chill of winter into his lungs, and then he pushed himself up onto his elbows.

And he froze.

Barely six feet away, staggering to his feet with a knife in his hand, and robes still dripping with blood, was Jin Guangyao.

*No, no, no, no –*

This wasn't supposed to happen – this was the last thing that was supposed to happen, how –

The *hand* – Jin Guangyao had grabbed Jingyi, and Jingyi had dragged him into the past.

*Shit.*

Jingyi scrambled to his feet, but Jin Guangyao had already seen him, and there was murder in his eyes. He lunged forward, and Jingyi leapt back – and then he heard the voices.

“... truly, Er-ge, I don't think Da-ge needs to worry about Huaisang nearly as much as he does. He's a good boy.” That was Jin Guangyao's voice, light and kind, and the Jin Guangyao across from him froze.

Someone laughed, and Jingyi's chest tightened painfully. *Zewu Jun*. “I think that's the problem. He's still a boy. I agree with you, though – I wish Wangji...”

“I know.”

The silent Jin Guangyao was staring at the bend in the end of the road, his eyes bulging in disbelief. He turned, looking at Jingyi, and then there was the sound of footsteps, nearing the corner, and Jin Guangyao spun around, ducking off the road to hide behind a nearby tree. Jingyi threw himself into the woods on the other side of the path, barely ducking down in time before Zewu Jun and the Younger Jin Guangyao walked around the corner.

He wanted to spring up, to run to Zewu Jun and tug him away from the murderer in front of him, to beg for his clan leader to help him find Sizhui and the others, but he couldn't – this

Lan Xichen didn't know Jingyi, not as a nineteen year old. If he tried to say he was from the future, then Future Jin Guangyao would leap out too, he was sure, with a horror story that painted Jingyi as the villain, and Jingyi knew full well there was no way Zewu Jun would believe a stranger over his sworn brother.

So all Jingyi could do was watch, and listen.

"Still," said Past Jin Guangyao encouragingly. "Tomorrow will be good for Wangji. He's always been fond of Wei-gongzi."

"He's excited," said Zewu Jun fondly. "Not that he's told me, but he is. I hope the preparations haven't been too taxing, A-Yao? You work too hard."

Past Jin Guangyao gave a light laugh. He sounded a little tired. "You are too kind, Er-ge. I am fine. But that said I should probably return to Koi Tower before it gets *too* late. It wouldn't do to sleep in and let something go wrong."

"I'm sure nothing will go wrong, but I will not keep you."

"I think I've been the one keeping you, Er-ge," said Jin Guangyao sheepishly. "It is long past nine. I shall see you tomorrow, Er-ge."

"Until then, A-Yao. I'm sure Jin Rulan's one-month celebration will be a great success."

Jingyi stiffened. Jin Ling's one-month celebration – that was the day Jin Zixuan had been killed, and it was *tomorrow*. Wei Wuxian had succeeded in his deadline, but only by the skin of his teeth. Jingyi couldn't go and look for his friends, he couldn't, because if they hadn't made it back (they had to, they had to, they had to) or they'd got lost, he was the only one who could stop the murder at Qiongqi Path.

Carefully, he crept back through the trees. If Future Jin Guangyao could remain distracted by his past self and Zewu Jun, Jingyi had a chance. A plan began to form in his head – not his best one, perhaps, and one that Sizhui almost definitely wouldn't approve of, but Jingyi was doing the best he could, and he made his way as quickly as he could to a very familiar house.

He had spent just as much time with his grandmother as he had his parents when he was growing up – both his mother and father loved to night-hunt, and while his grandmother was a formidable cultivator, she put most of her energy into healing and teaching. This meant that she didn't often use her sword, but she *had* left Jingyi practise with it as a child, and she *had* said to him that he could borrow it whenever he wished.

Now, technically she had said this on Jingyi's eighth birthday, which hadn't happened yet, but Jingyi could definitively say that he *remembered* her telling him that, and he didn't intend to keep her sword, which meant that he technically wasn't stealing. Maybe. The logic was flimsy, but it was his story and he would stick to it.

His grandmother was also a very deep sleeper. The people in Baling still told the story of the visiting cultivator who slept through an earthquake that shattered half a dozen plates around her. Even if he tripped over his own feet and face planted into a doorway, she was unlikely to



wake up. He did not have to worry about his grandfather, either – knowing the month, he was likely to be handling his business in Meishan. If not – well, Jingyi would be quiet. He would be an and out of the house in minutes.

Even though he didn't want to be. He wasn't ashamed to admit to himself that he wanted nothing more than to bang on the bedroom door until Nainai woke up and came out and hugged him and fixed everything. But he couldn't. She wouldn't recognise him, and explanations would take too much time.

He eased open the window and slipped inside. It was dark, very dark, but Jingyi knew this house as well as his own, and he snuck through to the medicine room his grandmother kept at the back of the house. It backed onto the guest bedroom where he used to sleep as a child, and he'd often been lulled to sleep by the sound of his grandmother humming as she ground herbs, or mixed a poultice.

A lump grew in his throat. It was so hard not to call out. But he couldn't – he *had* to get to Wei-qianbei before he reached Qiongqi Path. He had to. The only way he could do that was with a sword. He reached up and took the blade from the wall, stilling as the bracket that held it in place gave a low, loud click. It shouldn't have woken his grandmother.

"I'm sorry, Nainai," he whispered. "Just this once."

He crept out of the room, back towards the window he'd come through – and froze. There was a shadow by the window, a figure peering in, wearing a horribly familiar hat. Jingyi dove into the back bedroom and rolled across the floor, making for the back window.

"Who are *you*?"

Gasping sharply, Jingyi turned looked down to see a small boy clambering out of the bed by the wall. The child couldn't be more than three or four years old, and he was dressed in his nightclothes, frowning indignantly up at Jingyi and rubbing at his eyes. The headband around his forehead was ever so slightly crooked, and something in his face looked oddly familiar, and –

"I *said* who are you? And why do you have my Nainai's sword? It's time for sleeping, now!"

Jingyi had a very strange feeling that he knew who this might be.

"Uh... Lan Jingyi," he said, and the boy's frown deepened into a scowl – one that looked very, very familiar.

"I know who *I* am," said the boy. "And no one calls me that - I'm just too small yet! I said, who are you? If, if you are a bad guy I will just scream."

"Uh, no – no, don't yell!" Jingyi said, thinking quickly. "It's okay! So you're Lan Yu, Lan Jingyi, right? Well, I'm you. From the future."

Lan Yu's eyes narrowed, his chin jutting up. "From the future?"

“Yep,” said Jingyi, certain that no one would believe his three-year-old self if he declared he had met his future counterpart. “When you’re nineteen. See – we have the same freckles.” He held out his wrist, showing Lan Yu the triangular cluster of freckles just below his hand. Lan Yu held his own hand out, eyes wide with wonder as he saw that they matched. Jingyi took a deep breath. “I just need to borrow Nainai’s sword for a day or two, but I’ll bring it back.”

The toddler – because honestly this child who was also Jingyi was no bigger than that – suddenly scowled again, and gave a ‘hmp’, shaking his head. “That’s stealing.”

“Borrowing!” Jingyi hissed, and then he paused. Arguing with this child – with *himself*, in a manner of speaking, was not helping anyone. “Listen, A-Yu, go back to bed. You can tell Nainai all about it in the –”

A shadow loomed at the bedroom door, and Jingyi’s heart stopped. Jin Guangyao. A week ago, Jingyi would have scoffed at the thought of anyone calling Jin Guangyao intimidating. Now, he stood in a dark doorway with a knife in his hand and a smile on his face and a single finger held up to his lips, and he looked terrifying.

Lan Yu made a frightened little whimper. “Who – who are you? Big Me, Big Me, who-”

Jin Guangyao’s eyes widened slightly, moving from Jingyi to Lan Yu with a look of realisation, and then he gave a twisted grin, and he lunged – but not at Jingyi.

Because Lan Yu was closer, and Lan Yu was smaller, and Lan Yu was too frightened even to scream as the knife swung down –

Jingyi didn’t stop to think. He lurched for Lan Yu, snatching him off the ground and using the momentum to barrel past Jin Guangyao and throw himself out of the door. He was too slow to avoid Jin Guangyao’s blade catching his back and tearing across the flesh wounds, but it wasn’t deep, and the pain was nothing compared to the whips themselves. Hurling himself out of the window, Jingyi threw down the sword before him, launching into the sky the moment his feet touched down on it. For a moment, he wobbled, unused to flying with a toddler in his arms and unaccustomed to the sword beneath him, but after a second he righted himself, glancing over his shoulder.

Below him, Jin Guangyao was standing outside his grandmother’s house, glaring up at the sky. His arm was pointing up, as though he had thrown a spell or a talisman, but Jingyi was already out of reach, and as he watched the man turned, and fled into the trees.

A flash of red caught Jingyi’s eye, gleaming in the moonlight, and he glanced at it, his stomach squirming as he realised that it was the back of his own robes. They were utterly soaked in deep, red blood, still wet and glistening – Zewu Jun’s blood.

He had died at Jingyi’s back, after all.

Feeling very sick, Jingyi realised that the blood must have trailed behind him, that it was how Jin Guangyao had tracked him to his grandmother’s home.

“Big Me?” Lan Yu asked in a little voice, clinging to Jingyi’s robes with a death grip.

Taking a deep breath, Jingyi tightened his arms around Lan Yu. “It’s okay. This is, uh, an adventure. That was a bad man and we have to stop him, so we’re going on a little adventure, okay? You’ll be back home with Nainai before you know it!”

Lan Yu considered this. “An adventure?” he asked suspiciously.

“Yes,” said Jingyi, a flash of inspiration coming to him. “Hey, you aren’t *scared* are you?”

It worked – Lan Yu’s shriek was one of pure indignation. Jingyi was just glad they’d flown far enough that no one would be likely to hear it from the ground. “No!”

*Well*, Jingyi thought a little smugly, *let no one ever say I’m not self-aware*.

“Not scared,” Lan Yu grumbled quietly. “*You’re* scared.”

That was an understatement. Jingyi was terrified. But that wouldn’t help Lan Yu, and it wouldn’t help Wei Wuxian, so Jingyi had to focus on what might. He took a deep breath and steadied himself, pouring all of the energy he could into the sword, urging it faster than he had ever flown before. He didn’t know exactly where Qiongqi Pass was, but he did know that it was north-east of Gusu, and for now, he could do little but follow the stars.

Follow the stars, and pray that he wasn’t too late.

## Chapter End Notes

So, we're now in the past! I hope that you enjoyed it, thank you for reading!

## Chapter 5

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

If there was any air left in his lungs, Sizhui would have still been screaming when he hit the ground. Instead, he was shuddering, his eyes clenched tightly shut, and but even before he drew breath, whimpers broke from his lips. He couldn't stop them – he didn't have the strength even to try. Slowly, he became aware of sounds around him – someone sniffing, someone else sobbing. Zizhen's hand was still clutching his, so tight Sizhui's fingers were aching, but he couldn't bring himself to let go.

After a moment, he opened his eyes. It was still dark, but this darkness was different. This was night, and there were stars, and the weight of the world wasn't crushing in on him. When he glanced to his side he could see Zizhen, already sitting up with his knees tucked under his chin, one hand clutching Sizhui's and the other just as tight around Jin Ling's. Jin Ling was still lying down, but he'd curled onto his side, his other arm cast over his eyes. He was sobbing. Desperately.

Tears blurred his friends out of sight, and Sizhui blinked, pulling himself upright and looking around. They were in a field of tall grass beside a winding river, and it looked like there was a road on the other side of the water. He couldn't see any houses, or any people, or any light save for the stars. Wherever they were, they were alone.

Sizhui's heart stuck in his throat. "Jingyi?"

Zizhen flinched, squeezing his eyes shut and looking away, and Jin Ling let out a soft wail.

*No – no, no, no –*

"Jingyi!" Sizhui cried, louder this time, breaking away from Zizhen and throwing himself up onto his feet, spinning around so fast his hair whipped into his eyes. "Jingyi? *Jingyi!*"

"Sizhui," Zizhen whispered, but his voice broke, and Sizhui shook his head.

"No, no, he'll, he'll be here, he'll be somewhere, he – he can't – *Jingyi!*"

Zizhen stood up, letting go of Jin Ling's hand and taking Sizhui by the shoulders. "He's not here," he said, and though there were tears in his eyes, his tone was serious and firm. "If – hopefully, hopefully he's just back, back in Cloud Recesses. That's where he would be, right, his younger self? So maybe he's there. But he's not – he's not *here*, Sizhui."

*No, no, no –*

"He – I had him!" Sizhui's voice broke. "I had him, but – something – something pulled him away, I – I tried to hold on, I tried, but..." He looked down at his trembling hands. Four bright red lines ran from his palm down towards his fingers, and beads of blood ran along the

one nearest his little finger. Jingyi had tried to hold on – he had clawed the skin from Sizhui’s hand with his fingernails, but it wasn’t enough. He was gone.

“I – I’m sorry,” Jin Ling choked, and Sizhui looked over at him. The younger boy was upright now, and his eyes were wide, and he was staring straight at Sizhui. “I’m sorry, I – I didn’t mean to...”

Realisation struck Sizhui, and he stiffened. “You let him go,” he whispered. “You – you let go, you let go of him, you –”

“Sizhui!” Zizhen said quickly, shaking his shoulders. “It’s not Jin Ling’s fault.”

“He let go! Wei-qianbei, Wei-qianbei told us not to, he said whatever happened, whatever –” Sizhui’s own sobs strangled him, and he wrapped his arms around his waist.

“I’m sorry,” Jin Ling sobbed. “Sizhui, Sizhui I’m sorry, I didn’t mean, I didn’t mean to! But, but my – my jiujiu – *Jiujiu*...”

*Lan Xichen, swaying on his knees, eyes fluttering closed, wrenching the knife free –*

*Hitting the ground with a thud –*

“Bobo,” Sizhui whimpered, and the world began to spin. “Xian-gege... *Baba!*” Sizhui’s knees buckled, but Zizhen caught him, drawing him into a fierce hug. Somehow, even though it was half crushing him, it made it a little easier to breathe.

“It’s going to be okay,” Zizhen promised, his voice trembling with fear and grief. “It’s, we’re back now, Sizhui, we’re back, they’re going to be okay. They’re going to be fine. And Jingyi, Jingyi’s going to be fine. We’ll find him, Sizhui.” He lowered his voice. “It’s not Jin Ling’s fault, Sizhui. We didn’t know... He’s just a kid. We’re... we’re just kids.”

Sizhui’s heart caved in on itself, and he glanced down at Jin Ling. He was curled into a little ball with his arms clutching his knees, and he was shuddering with every sob.

And he was still apologising.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry!”

Sniffing, Sizhui pulled away from Zizhen and knelt beside the younger boy, pulling him into a hug without a word. At first, Jin Ling stiffened, but then he melted into the embrace with a little cry, turning his face into Sizhui’s shoulder.

“I’m sorry!”

“Zizhen’s right,” Sizhui said, squeezing Jin Ling a little tighter. “It’s not your fault.”

“It is, though,” Jin Ling cried bitterly. “I – I was the one that snuck out, I was the one who went to – to the stupid temple, I was the one that got, that got us caught – if it wasn’t for me you’d be back, back in your beds and you’d be fine, and –”

“That’s not fair, Jin Ling,” said Zizhen gently, crouching down at his other side. “You didn’t know.”

“But I should’ve done! I should’ve – I should’ve thought it out, I – I –”

“Breathe,” Zizhen ordered, and Jin Ling shakily obeyed. “It doesn’t matter now. None of that does. It’s – it’s just a bad memory. Right now, we need to focus – we need to find out where we are, and *when* we are, and where we’re going, alright?”

Sizhui nodded mutely. Perhaps, if he was a different person his anger at Jin Ling wouldn’t have faded faster even than it emerged, but all he felt now was grief, and a weariness that seemed to press down upon his shoulders like the weight of the sky.

“I might be able to figure it out,” said Zizhen, his eyebrows furrowed. “There’s a trick – I’ve never included the year before, and that *could* make it a little difficult, but it should still work...”

Despite everything, a faint tug of curiosity rose in Sizhui. “A trick?”

Zizhen nodded. “Baling Ouyang may not have as many spells of our own as the great sects, but we have a few,” he said mildly, reaching out to grab a stick. As he spoke, he began to scratch a small circle into the ground. “A-Die made sure we all learnt this one after the first time A-Kan got drunk.” A faint, fond smile tugged at Zizhen’s lip. “In all other ways my brother may be the perfect child, but he’s never been able to hold his liquor. He ran off halfway to Yunmeng, and woke up in a pigsty with no idea where he was or what day of the week it was. Then he got lost on the way back, took a detour near Chongyang, and missed A-Qin’s sword giving ceremony. She’s never let him forget it. And A-Die made sure we all learnt the Presence Spell, so we wouldn’t make the same mistake. To be honest, I’m not sure A-Kan’s ever got over the embarrassment – I’ve not seen him drink more than a cup or two since.” Zizhen stepped back, tilting his head slightly as he examined the mini array he’d scratched into the floor. Around the outermost circle were notations of years, every one between Jin Ling’s birth and the moment they had left, and inside was a smaller circle, marked by the numbers one to thirty. Inside that circle came a ring of months, and within that Zizhen had drawn a single arrow.

“It’s a calendar,” Sizhui realised.

Zizhen nodded. “Pretty much.” He closed his eyes, holding his hand steady over the middle of the circle. After a moment, a glow appeared beneath it, and his face tightened with concentration. The glow grew stronger, a ball of blue light several shades deeper than the icy-blue hue of the spells of the Lan Clan. The scratches on the ground took on the same shade, glowing as though flooded with ethereally bright blue water. Then there was a hissing sound, and the blue disappeared, small tendrils of smoke rising from the array. Zizhen opened his eyes, and smiled. “It worked!”

Sizhui peered down at the array, and his eyes widened. Most it had disappeared, but a number and a month and a year were burnt bright red into the ground, and the arrow had swung around to point in a different direction. It had grown longer, too, and a smaller arrow splintered off from the base of it, above which gleamed the character for ‘north.’

Jin Ling choked, and Sizhui's heart stopped. "What? Jin Ling, *what?*"

"That's – if that's today, that's – that's the day before, before my father-" Pale as the moonlight itself, Jin Ling looked up at the older two boys. "Where are we? We can't – we don't have any swords, if we don't make it in time, we – we-"

Sizhui squeezed Jin Ling's arm. It felt a little easier to breathe, knowing that Wei Wuxian was still alive, but it was a bittersweet relief. If they were this close, and Jin Ling still couldn't save his father, he knew it would crush him. It would crush Sizhui too.

"Wei-qianbei suggested that the spell would land us in the middle point of where we all were," said Zizhen carefully. "Jin Ling was in Lanling, I'm guessing you were in Yiling, Sizhui? And I was... well, I thought I would've been in Baling, but-" His eyes widened, "No, no I wasn't, because A-Die would've been going to Jin Ling's one-month, and he hates travelling early so he would've gone the night before, and he was still so paranoid then, so I would've been with him – probably somewhere close to Lanling, maybe even in the city itself! Yeah – that makes more sense, because this long arrow here points to Baling, and from the look of it we're miles away. So we're either halfway between Yiling and Lanling, or closer to Lanling, if the pull was stronger with the two of us? I'm not sure. But either way, if we start moving now, we might have a chance of getting to Qiongqi Path before Wei-qianbei does. It'll be that way."

Sizhui stared at his friend for a moment, and Jin Ling shook his head slightly. "How'd you figure all that out?"

Zizhen shrugged. "I've always been good at geography. I like maps. Come on – even if we're closer to Lanling we've got a lot of ground to cover."

Sizhui and Jin Ling scrambled to their feet. No one said anything about 'sleep.' Exhaustion was tugging at Sizhui, but it was easy enough to ignore, especially with his golden core humming as though he had all the energy in the world. They took off quickly, jumping over the river to take to the path. After a while, when the pace was set, Jin Ling broke the silence.

"Zizhen, what did you mean when you said your father was paranoid? He's always seemed sane enough to me."

Sizhui almost felt the need to roll his eyes at Jin Ling's lack of tact, but the younger boy sounded genuinely curious.

Zizhen's face fell. "My father... He's always been good friends with Yao-zongzhu. Unfortunately. But... as much as I can't stand him, he... what happened to the Yao sect during the war was horrible. And I was born on the day it happened. A-Die was terrified that Baling would be next, and he took A-Kan and my sisters and I everywhere with him. A-Kan says that he even took us to stay in Qinghe when he joined the war effort. I was five before A-Die stopped feeling the need to drag us around behind him."

A chill ran down Sizhui's spine. He hadn't known that Zizhen was born the same day the Yao sect were massacred, but he did know that Yao-zongzhu and Ouyang-zongzhu were close.

“Oh,” said Jin Ling quietly.

Zizhen hummed, nodding his head. “Oh.”

There wasn’t really much else to say. They kept walking, at a pace just below a run, until the sun began to rise, and Zizhen got a better look at the scenery. He didn’t say anything, but with the look he gave Sizhui and Jin Ling, he didn’t need to.

They began to run.

The sun rose higher, but the day grew little warmer, and soon Sizhui’s lungs were burning. He was a cultivator, and a strong one, but he was also exhausted, and afraid, and still reeling from being thrown sixteen years into the past, and he just wanted to *stop* – but he didn’t. He couldn’t. They couldn’t even slow down.

Every step took him closer to Qiongqi Path, and every second he wasted was another opportunity for Su She to take control of Wen Ning, to kill Jin Ling’s father and doom Sizhui’s entire family. Every time he stumbled he pushed himself faster, and the others kept pace beside him.

The land began to loom on either side of them, carving up into a valley, and sounds began to carry towards them.

Sounds of battle cries, and the unmistakable call of a flute.

“Shit!” Zizhen gasped, even as Jin Ling and Sizhui began to sprint. “Shit, shit, *shit!*”

Legs moving so fast he could barely feel them, Sizhui saw figures in the distance, small silhouettes at first, though they quickly grew clearer. On the hill above them were cultivators in white and in gold, fighting a blur of black – on the ground before them was a dark figure that could only be Wei Wuxian, his flute raised to his lips.

*Faster, faster, faster, move faster!*

There were two young Jin men, too, one standing between Wei Wuxian and the other, yelling for the man to stop.

“Don’t you know that-”

And the black blur leapt down from the cliff, and Sizhui knew it was Wen Ning, but there was no time to cry out a warning, and the Ghost General drew back his arm to strike the middle Jin.

Sizhui launched himself into the air, colliding with Wen Ning in the same moment that Jin Ling barrelled past him, knocking the Jin man to the ground. Snarling, Wen Ning spun around, trying to throw Sizhui off, but Sizhui locked his legs around his cousin’s waist and threw his arms around him too for good measure.

“Wen-xiansheng,” he cried, “Wen-xiansheng please calm down, please calm down!”



Wen Ning roared, reaching up and seizing Sizhui's left wrist, and then a splintering, shattering pain shot through his arm, tearing a scream from his lips. White light bloomed before Sizhui's eyes for a moment, but he held on even tighter with his other arm, clinging on for dear life, and his voice broke out in ragged sobs.

"Please, Wen-xiansheng, it's not your fault, it's not, just stop, please, please stop!"

*"Wen Ning!"*

Wen Ning froze, suddenly becoming very, very still, and Sizhui looked slowly towards the sound of the shout. Zizhen had flung himself in front of Wei Wuxian, pushing him back from the fight and throwing out his arms to shield him from the archers, but Wei Wuxian was staring incredulously at him, and at Sizhui, and Jin Ling, and the cultivators on the cliff –

And Sizhui's heart rose and fell and twisted and leapt, because Wei Wuxian was alive and he was breathing but he was shocked and confused and angry and he was *alive* and he was going to stay that way and he had to stay that way because Sizhui needed him and –

"Jin Zixuan," Wei Wuxian shouted, "What the *hell* is going on?"

With a start, Sizhui realised that Jin Ling and Jin Zixuan were still on the ground. They were sitting up, now, but Jin Ling was stiller than Sizhui had ever seen him, and he was staring at his father with his mouth ajar, and Jin Zixuan was staring back, a strange look on his face. There was confusion tugging between his eyebrows, but there was something else, too, something Sizhui couldn't read. When Wei Wuxian shouted he blinked and glanced at him, and as he did the Jin behind him surged forward to stand behind his shoulder.

"What do you mean, 'what's going on?'" he spat, and Wen Ning moved again, stepping in front of Wei Wuxian and shifting his feet back into a defensive stance. "This is clearly a trick of yours, an ambush – that's, Zixuan, that rat is impersonating our sect – he's –"

"Zixun," Jin Zixuan said sharply, staring at Jin Ling again. "Shut up."

"We can explain!" said Zizhen quickly. "We're on your side. Well, uh, we're on your side, Jin-gongzi, and your side, Wei-qianbei, but not his." He nodded towards Jin Zixun, whose face turned red with rage. "This is a setup, it's all a trap! There's another demonic cultivator on the other side of that hill, he was trying to control Wen Ning and kill Jin Zixuan – and we know who it is, but – but before we say anything else could you please tell those archers to stand down before someone gets skewered?"

"What? Another demonic – what?" Wei Wuxian asked.

"Gongzi," said Wen Ning, though he stayed facing Jin Zixun. "I heard – there were two flutes. I was... confused."

Wei Wuxian swore, loudly and colourfully, and then his voice grew darker. "You – Lan – let go of Wen Ning. Now."

With a start, Sizhui realised that he was still clinging to his cousin's back. "Oh! Sorry, I'm sorry!" He stuttered, jumping down and bowing respectfully to Wen Ning, who glanced at him, looking utterly baffled. Wei Wuxian opened his mouth, but before he could say anything, Jin Zixuan spoke softly.

"I know you," he said, and Sizhui looked back at him. Jin Zixuan was still staring at Jin Ling, and Jin Ling was still motionless, save for the tears now spilling down his cheeks. "I don't... I don't know *how*, but I know you."

Jin Ling's breath caught in his throat, and he nodded, a little frantically.

"How..."

"Zixuan! Are you really just going to sit there staring at the scum who ambushed you?"

Sizhui whipped around, anger rising hotter and faster than he'd expected in his chest. Usually, this was when he would let Jingyi speak, and shame the opposition into silence, but Jingyi wasn't here, and not only had Jin Zixun offended Jin Ling, but he had set up an ambush to kill Sizhui's Xian-gege, and Sizhui had well and truly had enough.

"Ambushed? *Ambushed*? Jin Zixuan would be dead if it wasn't for us, and so would you! Wei Wuxian was the one who was ambushed, and unfairly and wrongly – *he* didn't cast the hundred holes curse on you – and you didn't even think about looking for proof, you just decided to take *three hundred* cultivators to massacre a man who *won you a war* not long ago, and because you're too stupid to think things through you nearly got Jin Zixuan and your dumb self killed! So *stop* calling my friends scum and start shutting up and listening, *if* you think you're capable of it!"

Silence followed Sizhui's words, broken only by his own angry breaths, until behind him, Zizhen sniggered.

"Wow..." he said. "With all due respect, Jin-gongzi, you don't know how badly you've fucked up that even *Sizhui* would yell at you like that..."

Ignoring him, Sizhui took a deep breath, and turned to Jin Zixuan, bowing low. Then, he turned, and tried not to cry as he bowed, even lower, to Wei Wuxian. "I understand this must be confusing, but given that we just saved your lives, I beg a moment of your time and trust, so we can explain ourselves."

Wei Wuxian and Jin Zixuan shared a look, seeming rather suspicious of each other, but then they both nodded slowly, and Jin Zixuan got to his feet, offering Jin Ling his hand. Jin Ling's lower lip trembled, but he gave a little smile and took the offered hand, letting the man – his father – help him to his feet. Jin Zixuan smiled back for a moment, and then he looked at Wei Wuxian, his face hardening.

"I assume if I tell the archers to stand down, you won't set Wen Ning on us again?"

"Assuming no one tries to kill us again, yes," said Wei Wuxian, his voice just as tight, and Wen Ning moved silently to his side, standing behind Wei Wuxian's shoulder.

Jin Zixuan nodded, and held up his hand, glaring daggers up at the archers on the hill. Slowly, they lowered their swords and their bows, and with a jolt of anger and shame, Sizhui realised that they weren't all Jin – there were Lan up there too.

He took a deep breath, his mind whirring as fast as his racing heart. “Thank you,” he said carefully, bowing again. “First and foremost, there is another demonic cultivator on the other side of those hills, and I don't think we'll be fully safe until he's gone.”

Jin Zixuan's eyes narrowed, and he glanced up at the cultivators on the hill. Seeming to recognise two of them, he called loudly, “Luo Fang, Wang Liejie, search the hills! Anyone you find, bring here!”

Two of the golden-clad figures above them bowed and took to their swords – the others waited, and watched.

“Thank you,” Sizhui breathed, bowing again. He suspected that Su She had likely already fled, but it was still a relief to have people looking for him. “With your permission, Jin-gongzi, Wei-qianbei, I'd like to cast spell around us so that our conversation can't be heard. Some of the things we need to tell you are... dangerous, to us, and if they're heard by people who can't be trusted, we...”

“A silencing spell?” repeated Jin Zixuan, and Sizhui nodded.

“It wouldn't block anything other than sound,” he promised. “If – if you thought we were going to attack you and you signalled your archers to shoot, the arrows would go right through the barrier, and you can move in and out of it without any effort. It's just... to keep us safe. Please.”

Jin Zixuan inclined his head slowly. “From your tone, I imagine you want my cousin to stay outside of your spell.”

“Given that what I know of him is limited to his behaviour today yes,” said Sizhui solemnly, and Jin Zixuan nodded once.

“Very well.”

“What?” Jin Zixun shrieked, but Sizhui glared at him, sending out the better-known Lan Silence Spell and sealing the man's lips shut. Jin Zixun gave an outraged, muffled shriek, and Jin Zixuan looked over his shoulder sharply.

“I did tell you to shut up,” he said, his voice tight. “I will hear what these young men have to say, and what Wei Wuxian has to say, and then I will decide if your actions today were justified. You will back up, and you will *stay there*, Zixun. You've caused more than enough trouble for one day.”

Glowering, Jin Zixun took several steps back. Grateful, Sizhui bowed to Jin Zixuan, and then drew a deep breath, and cast the spell for protection. The clear, Lan blue of the dome that fell around them eased a little of the tension from Sizhui's chest, and though he knew it would do

absolutely nothing to stop Jin Zixun or his archers from attacking them, it made Sizhui feel a little safer.

It seemed to have a similar effect on his friends. Jin Ling's shoulders relaxed ever so slightly, and Zizhen stepped forward and to the side to give Wei Wuxian more space, though Sizhui noticed he was still placed firmly between the archers and their target.

Steeling himself, Sizhui let himself look at Wei Wuxian again, and his heart ached. Wei Wuxian didn't look like he was being rescued – his jaw was tight, and he was gripping Chenqing so tightly his hand looked to be bleeding. He looked like a cornered animal, tense and afraid and ready to fight, and Sizhui swallowed.

“Wei-qianbei,” he began, stopping when Wei Wuxian drew back, his eyes narrowing. “We - we – uh... Well...” Sizhui trailed off, unable to figure out how to start, and Wei Wuxian's eyes grew narrower, and darker.

“Spit it out!” he said, Chenqing trembling in his hand. “Who are you?”

Wen Ning, however, staring at Sizhui with the same slow recognition he had shown after the Demon Subdue Palace. It was encouraging, and Sizhui took a deep breath.

“My name is Lan Yuan, courtesy name Sizhui, and from the age of three I was raised by Hanguang Jun,” he said, refusing to pause at the startled choke of Wei Wuxian and the bewildered drop of Jin Zixuan's jaw. “But my name at birth was Wen Yuan, and up until the age of three I lived with you, Wei-qianbei, at the Yiling Burial mounds. This is Ouyang Zizhen, second son and fourth child of Ouyang-zongzhu, and this is Jin Ling, courtesy name Rulan.” Wei Wuxian drew in a strangled gasp, his face going whiter than a ghost's, and Jin Zixuan's eyes bulged to the point Sizhui was half-afraid they would drop out. “Sixteen years from now, Wei-qianbei, you sent us back in time to save our lives, and in the hope that we could also save Jin-gongzi, and the lives of everyone in the Burial Mounds. That's how we know that there's a demonic cultivator named Su She on the other side of that hill, and that he was trying to make Wen-xiansheng lose control to give Jin Guangshan and Jin Guangyao an opportunity to besiege the Burial Mounds. Su She was also the one who cast the Hundred Holes Spell on Jin Zixun – he has the marks on his chest to prove it. If you don't believe me...” He paused, thinking back on his limited, hazy memories of toddling around the Burial Mounds, and then he felt tears sting the back of his eyes. “I remember how excited you were to go and see your Shijie. I remember that you missed her, very much, and I – I said I'd teach you how to fly, so we could go see her together. I wanted to come with you today, but you said that Qing-gugu needed my help with laundry because I was so mucky.”

Wei Wuxian's mouth opened, and closed, and opened, and closed, and Jin Zixuan shook his head slightly, looking at Jin Ling once more. Sizhui wasn't sure he had ever seen his friend look so terrified, and his stomach surged with guilt. Perhaps he shouldn't have given away Jin Ling's identity so soon – perhaps he should have waited until they believed him, but Jin Zixuan took a small step towards Jin Ling, a little smile on his face.

“Jin Ling?” he asked softly, and Jin Ling nodded, wiping his sleeve across his cheeks.

“A-Die,” he whispered, his voice cracking, and then Jin Zixuan stepped closer, reaching out slowly to put a hand on his son’s shoulder.

Jin Ling broke. Tears sprang to Sizhui’s own eyes as his friend collapsed against his father’s chest, sobbing loudly and desperately and clinging to Jin Zixuan, and at once Jin Zixuan wrapped his arms around Jin Ling and cuddled him close. Jin Ling’s crying grew louder.

Sizhui swallowed. “In – in the life we knew, Jin-gongzi was killed today. Jin Ling...” He faltered, and glanced at Wei Wuxian. There were tears in the man’s eyes, and he was staring at Jin Ling with undisguised sorrow and awe, but then he looked back at Sizhui, and he shook his head slightly. He looked almost like he was going to be sick.

“I don’t... you said *I* sent you back?” he asked, and Sizhui nodded. Wei Wuxian swallowed, stepping around Zizhen and holding out his hand. “Show me your wrist – your right one.”

Immediately, Sizhui held out his arm, and Wei Wuxian grabbed it, pulling up his sleeve, and Sizhui drew in a sharp breath. “*Oh...*”

Emblazoned on his skin were the characters Wei Wuxian had written back in the cell, but they weren’t in ink anymore. Instead, they looked like old burn scars, raised and red. It looked like it should hurt, but it didn’t, not even when Wei Wuxian ran his thumb over his name.

Trembling, he looked up and studied Sizhui’s face, and then he swallowed. “A-Yuan?”

Sizhui nodded, wiping quickly at his cheeks and trying to smile, but Wei Wuxian was so close, and he looked so pained and Sizhui’s chest ached with the urge to sob. He looked down at his toes, hoping that it would help him get his composure back, but then he lost control, tumbling forward. Wei Wuxian caught him with a small gasp, wrapping his arms around Sizhui tightly. Sizhui pressed his face into the man’s shoulder, trying not to collapse completely as Wei Wuxian ran a hand over his hair.

“It’s okay,” he murmured. “It’s okay, A-Yuan, I’m here, now. I’m here.”

“You – you – the ritual,” Sizhui sobbed. “You – you didn’t tell us that, that you -”

He felt Wei Wuxian wince. “I’m sorry,” he murmured. “I – wait...” he pushed Sizhui back slightly, holding him at arm’s length and studying his face. “Who else? Who else sent you back?”

“Jiang-zongzhu, Nie-zongzhu, and Zewu Jun,” said Sizhui, his voice trembling. “Our friend Jingyi, he – we got separated.”

Wei Wuxian’s eyes grew wide with horror. “Did I – did – I, they –”

“It was their choice,” said Zizhen quietly, realising where Wei Wuxian was going even before Sizhui did. “They knew what they were doing. We – we didn’t. It was horrible.”

Sizhui and Jin Ling nodded, and Wei Wuxian swallowed, looking up at Jin Zixuan. “The spell,” he said hollowly. “The only one I know that could... it demands the sacrifice of a

life.”

Jin Zixuan’s eyes widened, and he shook his head slightly. “Human sacrifice? Human sacrifice that leads to *time travel*?”

Wei Wuxian nodded, his face sombre. “I found the spell in the Burial Mounds, and I fleshed it out, but I swore I would never use it. It cost too much – I’d never, ever sacrifice a life for a spell, and it was too dangerous, too powerful – it would turn back time completely, and as much as I wanted to stop the attack on Lotus Pier, I – I couldn’t do it without stabbing someone else in the heart... And I couldn’t – there were parts of it I couldn’t finish, and I don’t...” He looked at Sizhui, and then at Jin Ling. “I must have been desperate. We must’ve... If *Zewu Jun* was to agree to such a thing, to wipe out sixteen years of history...”

“It was very bad,” said Jin Ling hollowly, and then he cleared his throat. His cheeks were a little pink, and he still looked completely overwhelmed, but when he looked at Wei Wuxian and continued there was a familiar bite to his voice, even as it shook. “We were kidnapped, and Hanguang Jun had been stabbed, and Jingyi was beaten and they said they were going to torture us to death – but watching that ritual was the absolute worst thing ever in the world, and you didn’t even warn us that you were all going to – and if you ever do *anything* like that again I’ll break your legs!”

To Sizhui’s surprise, Wei Wuxian gave a breathless laugh, staring at Jin Ling as though he was watching the sunrise for the first time. “Jin Zixuan,” he said, and his voice was almost a squeak, “Your son is a mini Jiang Cheng!”

Zizhen laughed, and Jin Ling’s scowl gave way to a surprisingly sheepish smile.

“Mm,” hummed Jin Zixuan, peering down at Jin Ling with his eyebrows raised, but he was smiling, too. Then his face fell slightly, and he squeezed his son’s shoulder. “Jin Ling... I know this must be difficult, but... can you offer us any more proof of what you’ve said? I believe you, I know you, but... others will not be convinced.”

“Wei-qianbei said they shouldn’t be,” said Jin Ling hesitantly. “Or, at least, that people shouldn’t know about it, outside of family. He said it would be too dangerous.”

“And I agree, at least for the time being, but still...” said Jin Zixuan, and Jin Ling’s shoulders slumped. Then, he straightened, and grinned, taking several steps back from his father.

“It might – I don’t know if it will work, but –” He held out his hand, and in a heartbeat Jin Zixuan’s sword flew from its sheath to rest in Jin Ling’s hand. Beaming, Jin Ling all but skipped back to his father’s side, bowing to offer the sword back –

And Jin Zixun burst forward, his sword raised to swing around Zixuan and strike Jin Ling down, and even as Sizhui yelled he knew it was too late.

“*Jin Ling!*”

Jin Zixuan spun around faster than Sizhui could track, throwing Jin Ling behind him and blocking his cousin’s sword with his own. “Zixun, drop your sword, now!”

“Zixuan! Are you possessed?” Jin Zixun cried incredulously, striving forward, but Jin Zixuan growled, forcing his cousin back and driving him out of the dome.

“I swear to you, Zixun, if you raise your sword to him again, I’ll take your hand,” he snarled, and for the first time he sounded truly angry. “Back off.”

“But –”

*“Lower your sword. Now.”* Jin Zixuan looked up at the mountain, raising his voice. *“Stand down.”*

Jin Zixun’s snarl deepened, but Jin Zixuan raised his sword and Zixun cursed, sheathing his own blade and stepping back. Without taking his eyes from his cousin, Jin Zixuan walked backwards, back under the dome.

“Jin Ling,” he said slowly, “Are you hurt?”

“I’m okay,” Jin Ling promised. “I –”

“Gongzi!” Wen Ning cried, and Sizhui looked behind him quickly. Wen Ning was pointing up into the sky, where a blur of white and silver sped towards them, and Sizhui’s heart leapt.

*“Jingyi!”*

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading, I hope you enjoyed it!

# Chapter 6

## Chapter Notes

As far as I'm aware there's no exact reference in canon as to who is the oldest out of Jingyi and Sizhui (I could find birthdays for both of them but no explicit age for Jingyi) so for the sake of this story, I'm making Jingyi the older of the two. As such, Sizhui sometimes refers to Jingyi as his shixiong and Jingyi refers to Sizhui as his shidi in this story.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The relief that struck Sizhui as Jingyi swept down to land was so intense that for a moment, the rest of the world seemed to fall away. All he could see was Jingyi, alive and in one piece and *alive*, and the moment his feet hit the ground Sizhui lurched forward, snatching his shixiong into a fierce hug. Vaguely, he was aware of something in between them, but he didn't care. Not when he'd spent the last few hours terrified that Jingyi was gone, not when Jingyi was now here, hugging him back with as much strength as he could put behind one arm.

"You're here," Sizhui breathed, his voice hitching in his throat. "You're here!"

"I'm here," Jingyi promised, shuddering slightly. "You're all, you're – thank god..." He pulled away, grinning at Zizhen and Jin Ling, and then he looked over at Wei Wuxian and Wen Ning and Jin Zixuan, and his shoulders slumped with relief. "Oh good, everyone's still alive."

"No thanks to you - you're late!" scolded Jin Ling, crossing his arms over his chest and scowling in a way that Sizhui was starting to suspect meant 'I was worried about you.' "And why do you have a child?"

Sizhui blinked, noticing for the first time the toddler staring at him from his friend's arm. Jingyi winced, and took a deep breath.

"This is Little Me. We have a problem."

Sizhui felt like a boulder had fallen through his stomach. "A problem?"

Jingyi nodded. "Jin Guangyao came back with us."

Jin Ling choked, and Zizhen hissed, and Sizhui gripped Jingyi's wrist. "What do you mean, he – he can't've, he couldn't've, he-"

"He did," said Jingyi gravely, and Sizhui could see fear flickering in his eyes. "Full blown 'sadistic power-hungry murderous traitor covered in blood and still holding a knife' Jin



Guangyao. He grabbed me as the array started, and I – I must've dragged him through, but he's here."

Sizhui swallowed, looking at Wei Wuxian. "But... but you said – you said each cultivator could only send one person back, you said!"

"The blood sacrifice is what sends the body and the soul back," said Wei Wuxian tightly. "If he was covered in the blood of the fresh dead, and that blood hit the array..."

Sizhui's own blood froze, shards of ice in every vein. *Hanguang Jun*...

"But did you say Jin Guangyao? Who was Meng Yao?" Wei Wuxian continued, and Sizhui nodded.

"We hadn't got to that bit yet," he said to Jingyi.

"You're saying that the person who kidnapped you, who – who threatened you was A-Yao?" Jin Zixuan asked, sounding a little sick, and Sizhui winced, nodding as Jin Ling hung his head.

"He was also the one that planned this ambush," said Sizhui softly. "He planted the idea in Zixun's head that Wei Wuxian was the one who cast the curse, and made sure there were cultivators at his disposal. He's also the one that ordered Su She to the back hill."

Jin Zixuan's eyes widened, and he shook his head slightly, looking down at the ground as though he would find answers written in the dirt at his feet.

"That Jin Guangyao isn't the problem right now," insisted Jingyi. "It's the future one – he knows we're in the past but he doesn't know the rules and as soon as he figured it out he tried to kill Little Me."

The toddler nodded, looking only a little afraid, and incredibly indignant. "Yes," he said stubbornly, and from that single word Sizhui had no doubt this was indeed his shixiong's younger self. "Bad Man tried to hit A-Yu with a knife. Big Me ran away with A-Yu on Nainai's sword that Big Me stole."

Jingyi's cheeks flashed red and he scowled. "Borrowed!"

"Stole."

Jingyi clenched his jaw, but ignored A-Yu and looked at the others. "I'm afraid that Jin Guangyao thinks if he kills the younger versions of ourselves, we'll die too. I couldn't exactly stay around to explain why that wouldn't work, but – but as babies we're easier targets, and –"

"A-Ling," Jin Zixuan choked, his hand tightening around his sword. Everyone knew he wasn't talking about the Jin Ling standing behind him.

Jingyi nodded sombrely. "I'm worried that's where he's going."

“Shit,” Wei Wuxian whispered, going paler than Sizhui had ever seen him. “Shit, shit, fuck!”

“What about the others? You two?” Jin Zixuan asked urgently, nodding at Sizhui and Zizhen. “Your younger selves, are they safe?”

Jingyi answered before either of them could. “Sizhui’s still going to be in the Burial Mounds, and Zizhen’s clan are staying with another just south of here. I spotted them on the way over and left a very threatening note on the door saying I was going to kidnap Ouyang-zongzhu’s children. I figured that would be enough to warn them something’s coming.”

Zizhen raised his eyebrows. “You threatened my family?”

Jingyi shrugged. “It was that or kidnapping baby you, and that seemed more of a problem. I signed the note Xue Yang, so they’d take it seriously.”

Sizhui shuddered, and Zizhen winced.

“Yep,” he said, rubbing the back of his neck. “That oughta do it. A-Die won’t let baby me out of his sight until he’s my age.”

“Are you sure?” said Jin Zixuan, his voice tight and urgent. “Because I think your parents deserve to know what’s going on –”

“Ehh, maybe let’s wait until things are more settled,” said Zizhen uncomfortably. “My parents have never really been fans of Wei Wuxian, at any point in the timeline.”

“And yet you are?” muttered Wei Wuxian, too quiet to expect to be heard, but Zizhen looked at him sharply.

“Yes,” he said firmly. “Wei-qianbei has saved my life far more times than he’s endangered it. Besides, Hanguang Jun trusts you.”

Wei Wuxian’s eyes widened with surprising shock. “Lan Zhan? Lan Zhan trusts me?”

Sizhui nodded. “More than anyone.”

Wei Wuxian opened his mouth, and then closed it again. His eyes narrowed at something over Sizhui’s shoulder, and Sizhui turned to see two Jin cultivators flying down towards them – the men Jin Zixuan had sent to search the hills for Su She. Jin Zixuan strode outside of the dome.

“Well?”

“We found no one, Jin-gongzi, though we saw him come down to land,” said the first, nodding at Jingyi. “There were signs that someone was standing for quite some time on the eastern side of the mountain.”

Jin Zixuan nodded. “Very well. Go and wait with the others.”

The two men bowed, and with uncertain glances at Wei Wuxian and Wen Ning they mounted their swords, and flew back to the top of the hill. Jin Zixuan stepped back beneath the silence spell, his jaw clenching. “We need to get A-Ling out of Jinlintai, but I don’t know where to go.”

“Come back to the Burial Mounds,” Wei Wuxian said. “It’s safe enough there, as safe as anywhere can be, and we can listen to the full story together and figure out what to do next.”

Jin Zixuan hesitated for a moment, “The people there...”

“It’s not an army, A-Die,” Jin Ling said quietly. “Jiujiu said there weren’t even any cultivators there, besides Wei Wuxian and Wen Qing.”

Jin Zixuan nodded slowly. “If Wen Ning comes to Jinlintai-”

“No,” said Wei Wuxian, looking at Wen Ning. “It’s too dangerous – if there’s another demonic cultivator about you’re in danger, even with the protective charms. Take the baby Lan back to the Burial Mounds, keep him safe. Keep an eye on the wards, and tell Wen Qing we’re coming, okay?”

“But gongzi-”

“I’ll be fine, Wen Ning,” Wei Wuxian promised, and Zizhen stepped forward.

“We won’t let anything happen to him, Wen-xiansheng. We promise.”

Sizhui, Jin Ling and Jingyi nodded, and Wei Wuxian blinked at them, looking oddly confused. Jingyi hesitated for a moment, and then stepped up to Wen Ning, offering him the child in his arms.

“Don’t, I don’t know, drop him or eat him or anything,” he said, and Sizhui rolled his eyes.

“Jingyi...”

“Well, the first time we met he held me in the air by my neck and nearly choked me to death, I haven’t forgotten!” protested Jingyi, and Wen Ning’s eyes widened.

“That wasn’t his fault,” argued Jin Ling, a little surprisingly. Or perhaps it wasn’t surprising – Wen Ning had now not killed his father, and arguing with Jingyi seemed to be Jin Ling’s favourite past time.

“I know it wasn’t, and I never said it was! But still!”

“I will take good care of him, young master,” Wen Ning promised, bowing low and taking little A-Yu, who still looked rather unfussed by everything. “But how will you get to Jinlintai?”

“We will fly,” said Jin Zixuan.

“Uh,” Wei Wuxian began.

“We don’t have swords,” said Sizhui regretfully, but Jin Zixuan just shook his head.

“We have enough,” he said, and he waved his hand at the ward. “Will you take this down?”

Sizhui nodded, dispelling the charm, and at once, Jin Zixuan turned to his cousin.

“Zixun,” he said sharply. “Don’t talk, just listen. I don’t believe that Wei Wuxian is the one who cursed you, but even if he did, you have disgraced our clan and dishonoured me in your actions today. You led an ambush against someone I personally invited to my son’s one-month celebration, like some low-life bandit, and if you’d succeeded you would have devastated Yanli, and that is not acceptable to me. But for now, I’ve got bigger issues than you. I’ll help you track down who really cast the curse, and I will help you to get rid of it – but not until I’m sure my wife and my son are safe. For now, I need your sword.”

Jin Zixun had been growing redder and redder during the course of his cousin’s words, but at the last sentence he turned positively purple. “Zixuan –”

“I need your sword.”

A wordless shriek of rage tore from Zixun’s lips, but then he froze, and stiffened. “You really are possessed... The Jin Clan stand with our swords, Jin Zixuan, we –”

“I am not possessed. Give me your sword, Zixun, before I have to ask Wen-gongzi to fetch it from you for me. You not only nearly killed my brother in law today, but you nearly got me killed too – you brought dishonour on me and on my wife and on our clan, and speaking of Yanli I trust her judgement far better than I trust yours. You will walk back to Jinlintai, and you will contemplate what happens when you act before you think. Give me your sword.”

The colour had drained from Zixun’s face now, leaving him stark white. “Zixuan...”

Jin Zixuan said nothing, simply holding out his hand. For a moment, the two young masters of the Jin stared at each other, and then Zixun broke, thrusting his sword into his cousin’s hand.

“Thank you,” said Jin Zixuan stiffly, turning back to the others without completely turning his back on Jin Zixun. “You can ride with me,” he said to Jin Ling, who beamed as though he had been offered the world. Then, Jin Zixuan nodded at Jingyi. “Can you take one of your friends?”

“Of course,” said Jingyi, and Zixuan nodded.

“Wonderful.” Then he held out Jin Zixun’s sword to Wei Wuxian.

“Jin Zixuan!” shrieked Jin Zixun, and Sizhui promptly put the Silence Spell on him once again. Wei Wuxian hesitated, glancing uncertainly at the sword, and Sizhui stepped forward.

“I’ll ride with you, Wei-qianbei, if you don’t mind?” he said softly, meeting his gaze intently and Wei Wuxian blinked. His eyes widened slightly, and Sizhui thought he could see a flicker of fear within them, but when Sizhui smiled sadly he gave a small, shaky nod.

“I don’t mind,” he said, glancing at the man beside him. “Be careful, Wen Ning.”

“You two, gongzi,” said Wen Ning with a bow, and then he turned and leapt away, travelling far enough in three bounds to disappear from sight.

Jingyi turned, watching them go – and Sizhui’s heart dropped down into his stomach. The back of his friend’s robes were streaked with blood, and torn apart in several places by the strike of the whip. In places, smaller lines of blood dripped down, stretching almost to his waist, and Sizhui choked.

“*Jingyi...*”

Wincing, Jingyi looked back around at him, plastering a wholly unconvincing smile onto his face. “Ah, Sizhui, I’m okay. Let’s go and get baby Jin Ling, okay? We don’t have time to worry about a couple of whip wounds right now.”

Sizhui shook his head, because Jingyi was *lying* – he was lying and he was not okay – but Wei Wuxian took Sizhui’s hand, squeezing it gently.

“He’s right, A-Yuan,” he said softly. “But as soon as we get to the Burial Mounds, we can get Wen Qing to look over him, okay?”

It was absolutely not okay, but there wasn’t really much of a choice, so Sizhui nodded.

“Right,” said Jin Zixuan, mounting his sword and holding out his hand to Jin Ling. “Let’s go.”

Meeting Sizhui’s eyes, Wei Wuxian nodded, and together they mounted the sword. It was unfamiliar, and less steady than Sizhui’s own sword, but he wobbled only for a moment before righting himself. Wei Wuxian stood behind him, gripping onto Sizhui’s robes very, very tightly. The pace Jin Zixuan set was swift and urgent, but not too difficult, and Sizhui couldn’t help but glance over at Jin Ling.

Jin Zixuan’s arm was wrapped around his son, holding him close, and the small, tearful smile on Jin Ling’s face was so pure and innocent that it hurt to see. Sizhui looked away, trying to ignore the curl of jealousy in his gut. It wasn’t fair on Jin Ling to be jealous – Jin Ling had never even had a chance to know his father, and so the fact that Jin Zixuan had recognised him so quickly must mean more to Jin Ling than Sizhui could ever guess.

It wasn’t Jin Ling’s fault that Wei Wuxian had been so sharp, so suspicious. It wasn’t Jin Ling’s fault that Hanguang Jun would not know Sizhui at all.

“A-Yuan,” Wei Wuxian murmured, so quietly Sizhui knew it was for his ears alone. “I’m – I’m guessing, from what you said that... in your first lifetime I – I wasn’t able to be there for you. After today.”

Sizhui’s breath caught in his lungs, and he nodded, fighting back the urge to reach around and grab Wei Wuxian’s hands like a child.

“Well, I’m sorry, and I’m here now,” Wei Wuxian promised, squeezing Sizhui’s arm. “And I – ah, screw it.” And then Wei Wuxian flung his arms around Sizhui, tugging him close, and Sizhui felt so safe so suddenly he was half sure the man had hit him with some sort of spell. “Do you mind?”

Sizhui shook his head, grabbing onto Wei Wuxian’s arm tightly. “No.”

“Good,” said Wei Wuxian, and he seemed to relax slightly. When he spoke again, his voice was much louder. “I can’t be letting Jin Zixuan be the best father around here, now, can I?”

Clearly, Jin Zixuan had heard, and he looked over his shoulder to give Wei Wuxian a glare more withering even than one of Hanguang Jun’s, but then his eyes widened, and he slowed down a little, calling out sharply.

“Wei Wuxian – does Yanli know?”

“Does Yanli know what?” asked Wei Wuxian, sounding confused.

Jin Zixuan narrowed his eyes. “That you have a son. Because if she doesn’t I will *not* be the one to tell her. Absolutely not.”

Wei Wuxian laughed slightly, adjusting his grip on Sizhui slightly. “She knows about Wen Yuan. Obviously, Lan Yuan here will be a bit of a surprise.”

Apparently satisfied, Jin Zixuan nodded, and looked back ahead, but Sizhui couldn’t breathe.

Was he really the son of Wei Wuxian? It didn’t feel *wrong* – the love he felt in his memories was the same kind he felt for Hanguang Jun, and the ache that missing Wei Wuxian left in his chest was the same kind of grief as missing his father. He knew that Wei Wuxian loved him, and cared for him, but in what memories Sizhui had of his early childhood, he knew he’d called the man ‘Xian-gege,’ not Fuqin or Baba or A-Die.

“A-Yuan?” Wei Wuxian asked, his voice quiet again. “Are you alright?”

“I...” Sizhui hesitated. This wasn’t the place, or the time – they had a deadline, and Sizhui had to concentrate on flying, and it wasn’t fair to have so deep a conversation when Wei Wuxian had no way of escape, but the words ‘father’ and ‘son’ were gnawing at his heart. “Do... do you really consider A-Yuan your son?”

Wei Wuxian stiffened, and Sizhui’s heart crumpled. He tried to focus on flying, to brace himself for the kindness he knew would come in Wei Wuxian’s rejection – but he was wrong. There was no pity in Wei Wuxian’s voice. Only guilt. “I know I don’t have the right,” he said quietly. “Your parents were real people, and I have no right to claim you when your uncles and aunts are nearer.”

Sizhui glanced down. “That’s... not a no...”

“Do you want me to?” asked Wei Wuxian even quieter. There was a strange, vulnerable sort of hope in his voice, and Sizhui could only nod, and pretend that the tears in his eyes came from the wind. “Okay, then, A-Yuan,” Wei Wuxian whispered. “I can’t – Wen Qing may have

something to say about my claiming your younger self, but you – *you* – A-Yuan, are mine. My son. For as long as you want to be. Okay?”

“Okay,” Sizhui whispered, his voice cracking, and Wei Wuxian cuddled him closer.

“Good,” he murmured, pressing his forehead to the back of Sizhui’s head. “Good.”

The flight to Jinlintai did not take long. Sizhui expected to land in the outer rings of the tower, but instead Jin Zixuan led them high above the topmost point of the tower. There, he waved his hand, and a ring of gold shimmered beneath them, a hole opening in a ward Sizhui hadn’t been able to see. Without hesitating, Jin Zixuan dove straight down, and the others followed, ignoring the startled looks of guards and nobles alike to fly straight into the Pageant Hall.

Sizhui’s heart stumbled over itself.

Jiang-zongzhu was standing in the middle of the hall, beside a woman who could only be Jiang Yanli, their faces both creased with worry. In the woman’s arms was a squirming baby, and beside them, turning to look at the newcomers, was Hanguang Jun.

The relief that surged through Sizhui at the sight of his father was a tidal wave. He was there, and he was standing – upright, tall, unharmed. He wasn’t hurt, or dead, or dying. He was there. He was *there*.

His face, unreadable to so many, was an open book to Sizhui, and he saw Hanguang Jun’s worry give way to shock and then relief as his eyes fell on Wei Wuxian – but then his gaze shifted to Sizhui, and he froze. To Sizhui’s horror, anger kindled in his father’s eyes, anger and betrayal and bitter pain, and then his glare grew stronger, until he was piercing Sizhui with a look of utter loathing so fierce it turned the air in Sizhui’s lungs to ash.

Hanguang Jun hated him.

Sizhui felt like a fierce corpse had shoved its hand through his chest, like it was ripping his heart apart. If Hanguang Jun’s hatred was the price he had to pay for his father’s life, Sizhui would take it, but it was a pain little less than seeing his father’s bloody corpse.

His father was gone.

His father was nothing but a memory.

“Jin Zixuan, what’s going on?” demanded Jiang-zongzhu, and Sizhui tore his eyes away from Hanguang Jun.

Jin Zixuan had leapt from his sword, leaving Jin Ling hovering a foot or so in the air, and he took Jiang Yanli’s arm gently. “A-Li, I’m sorry, but we need to go, now. Jiang-zongzhu, Hanguang Jun, if you would be so kind as to accompany us, I would be most grateful. A-Ling isn’t safe here, we need to leave.”

Jiang-zongzhu blinked, shaking his head slightly and looking over at Wei Wuxian, his brow furrowed in confusion and anger. “What are you talking about? Wei Wuxian, what did you

do?”

“Nothing,” said Jin Zixuan, before even Jingyi could get in. “This is not his fault, but he is in danger from it. We need to-”

“Zixuan!” shouted a voice Sizhui didn’t know, a voice as sharp as a blade. “What is going on?”

Jin Zixuan seemed to relax slightly, and he gave a short bow. “Muqin, someone just tried to assassinate me, and pin the blame on Wei Wuxian.” Jiang Yanli gave a strangled gasp, grabbing her husband’s arm and staring, horror-struck, at Wei Wuxian. Jin Zixuan gave a small smile, squeezing her hand. “Luckily they did not succeed, but I do not believe A-Ling is safe here. Muqin, please tell Jin-zongzhu of this plot, and tell him I shall return to Jinlintai as soon as I am convinced I’ve secured the safety of my wife and my son. And please, Muqin, be careful — I do not know who to trust.”

“You don’t – you don’t know who to trust so you will take your wife and your son to fly away with *Wei Wuxian*?” cried the woman Sizhui assumed was Jin-furen, and Jin Zixuan met her eyes.

“Yes. Wei Wuxian will not hurt us. I am sure in this. But we have no time, we must go, now.”

Jin-furen’s eyes narrowed. “You know who it is. The threat.”

“I have suspicions, but I won’t cast judgement without evidence,” said Jin Zixuan firmly, glancing at Wei Wuxian. “I think we’ve had enough of that for today. Just be careful, Muqin, please.”

Reluctantly, Jin-furen nodded, and Jin Zixuan glanced at the older Jin Ling, still waiting on the hovering sword. The teen’s eyes were fixed on Jiang Yanli, and he was gripping the clarity bell that hung from his belt so tightly his hand was shaking, but there was so much awe on his face, and a deep joy, and she was peering back at him thoughtfully. There was confusion in her eyes, but when they landed on the clarity bell they widened slightly, almost as if they recognised it, and small sob bubbled up Sizhui’s throat before he could stop it.

It really did make him happy that both of Jin Ling’s parents seemed to recognise him before they were told. He just wished that it wasn’t happening in the same moment that Hanguang Jun was glaring at him with a loathing that made Sizhui want to die.

“A-Yuan?” Wei Wuxian murmured, holding him a little tighter and leaning forward a little, but as he did Sizhui saw Hanguang Jun’s hand tighten around Bichen, and he clenched his own jaw, shaking his head. He couldn’t speak. Not here, not now. He would break.

“Zixuan,” said Jiang Yanli, her eyes still on Jin Ling, “if your guest is lacking a sword, A-Cheng will take me.”

“You should take guards with you, too,” said Jin-furen, and Wei Wuxian stiffened, but Jin Zixuan shook his head.



“No. I don’t know who among the guard to trust, and in any case, we don’t have time. Let’s go.” He pressed a kiss to baby Jin Ling’s forehead, and then strode back to the older boy, mounting his sword again. Jiang-zongzhu and Jiang Yanli mounted Sandu, but Hanguang Jun did not move.

“Lan Zhan,” said Wei Wuxian softly. “Please. Trust me.”

Sizhui didn’t know if Wei Wuxian could see the utter heartbreak in his father’s eyes, but he could feel Wei Wuxian’s fear in his tight grip as Hanguang Jun hesitated. After an aching moment, Hanguang Jun closed his eyes, and mounted his sword.

The flight to Yiling didn’t take long, but Sizhui hated every moment of it. Jin Zixuan had set a pace fast enough to discourage any conversation, but Sizhui could still feel Hanguang Jun’s glare boring into him, and every time he gave in to glance at his father’s face he saw the hatred and the anger and the raw pain in his eyes. By the time the dark mists of the Burial Mounds began to come into view, Sizhui was half certain that the only thing keeping him upright was Wei Wuxian. Some part of him knew that it was unlikely to make Hanguang Jun feel better, so see the man he loved clinging to a stranger in the robes of the Gusu Lan sect, but Sizhui was afraid that the moment Wei Wuxian released his grip he would collapse entirely.

His stomach churned as they began to descend, passing the town of Yiling and nearing the entrance to the Burial Mounds. Memories were clawing at him – being captured by mercenaries, dragged down that road to the temple to be left to die, watching Wei Wuxian fall and slump against Hanguang Jun’s side, bloody and exhausted, with the name ‘A-Yuan’ on his lips...

... clinging to a paper butterfly, and looking up, up, up to see Xian-gege’s face, and ask if Rich-gege was going to be coming back again.

They landed, just outside the wards. Wei Wuxian’s arms fell away from Sizhui’s chest, but before Sizhui could crumble Wei Wuxian grabbed his hand instead, walking straight through the arch of trees that formed the gate, such as it was, to the Burial Mounds. When they were through it, he grinned, almost smugly, and then opened a hole in the wards.

“Everyone in, quickly,” he ordered. “If your demonic cultivator’s smart enough they might’ve sent people to lurk outside.”

Everyone obeyed, and Wei Wuxian sealed the wards behind them, adding several talismans so quickly Sizhui could hardly follow the movement of his hand. Just the one hand. The other was still holding Sizhui’s.

“Wei Ying,” growled Hanguang Jun, his voice low and dangerous. To Sizhui, it sounded pained, too. “*They are not* Gusu Lan.”

Sizhui felt like he’d fallen into the water of the Cold Springs as Hanguang Jun glared at Jingyi, and then at *him* with that awful, searing rage, and Wei Wuxian stepped forward, holding up the hand that wasn’t still clutching Sizhui.

“Lan Zhan, I know you don’t recognise them, but they are,” he said firmly, but a sudden realisation struck Sizhui in the heart, and his knees buckled. Wei Wuxian gasped slightly, grabbing his elbow and holding him steady. “A-Yuan?”

“I... I’m not,” Sizhui whispered, his voice catching painfully. Trembling, he pulled his hand out of Wei Wuxian’s and stepped forward, bowing low to Hanguang Jun and praying that it would hide most of his tears. “Hanguang Jun, we are from the future, and this is Lan Jingyi whose birth name is Lan Yu, and it is true that he is of Gusu Lan. It is in his blood, and he was born a Lan, and he always will be, but... but in truth I - I’m not.”

Jingyi made a noise like a strangled cat, and spluttered, “*Sizhui!*”

Sizhui stayed in the bow. “When I was three years old, I was rescued by Hanguang Jun, who gave me the name Lan Yuan, Lan Sizhui, to protect me from those who would kill me for bearing the name Wen. Hanguang Jun gave me my name and my ribbon and inducted me into the clan, and now – now that we’re... before that, now that that hasn’t happened, I – if – if Hanguang Jun wishes it, I will humbly and gratefully return my ribbon and my robes and – and my name.”

Silence.

Sizhui’s back began to burn, and his arms longed to tremble, but he held the bow and waited, waited while the others said nothing around him, while his tears dropped down onto the dusty dirt below him. Still, the silence continued.

*Oh.*

There was nothing he could do to stop his hands from trembling as he moved them behind his head, finding the bow of his ribbon, and he heard Jingyi choke, and –

“Stop,” said Hanguang Jun, and Sizhui froze. “That – won’t be necessary. I – Wei Ying?”

Wei Wuxian took Sizhui’s shoulder, gently but irresistibly pulling him back up. “I know it sounds insane, Lan Zhan, I know, but it’s the truth. Or as far as I can tell it is. This is my A-Yuan, though apparently you looked after him for quite a while, that’s Lan Jingyi, that’s Ouyang Zizhen, and that is my nephew Jin Ling. Sixteen years from now they got into some sort of trouble, and apparently I activated an array to send them back in time – choosing now, because apparently the first time Jin Zixun ambushed me things ended differently.”

“My cousin believed Wei Wuxian cast the hundred holes curse on him,” said Jin Zixuan swiftly. “He intended to kill him to free himself of the curse. When Wen Ning tried to defend Wei Wuxian, he was stirred into a frenzy, and would have killed me, had Jin Ling not knocked me to the ground, and Lan Sizhui not leapt onto Wen Ning’s back. They then explained that... Jin Guangyao... Jin Guangyao had planted a demonic cultivator on the back of the hill to take Wen Ning’s control away from him, in order to give my father a reason to ambush Wei Wuxian.”

“We don’t know any more of the story than that now, but I believe they’re telling the truth, and assuming no one *glares them to death* in the meantime, we can all go up to the Demon

Subdue Palace together and listen to the whole thing,” said Wei Wuxian, staring at Hanguang Jun, who looked so obviously stunned Sizhui was sure anyone could see it.

Sizhui was sure he did not look much better himself – he thought he might still be trembling, reeling from shock and relief and fear and a hundred other things he couldn’t name. Silently, Jingyi appeared at his side, standing close enough to press his shoulder against Sizhui’s.

“You’re actually serious?” blurted Jiang-zongzhu, and Sizhui glanced at him. “You genuinely want us to believe that these four... people... came from the *future*? That that is Jin Ling? That’s not Jin Ling, that’s Jin Ling!” His hands flailed a little as they pointed from the teenage Jin Ling to the baby in his sister’s arms.

“They’re both Jin Ling,” said Wei Wuxian calmly. “When the timeline re-set, Jin Ling and the others were essentially separated from their past selves. Now, there are two of them.”

Jiang-zongzhu shook his head. “And – you expect us to *believe* this? This is, it’s impossible!”

“A-Xian,” said Jiang Yanli, and her younger brother fell quiet. “Is this... do *you* really believe it?”

Wei Wuxian smiled at her, a smile Sizhui had never seen before. It was sad, and tired, but so full of adoration he couldn’t help but feel that Jiang Yanli was someone that *he* should love, too, someone the whole world should adore. “I do, Shijie.”

“Then we will listen to what you have to say with open minds, and decide where to go from there,” said Jiang Yanli, and though her voice was gentle as a lotus petal, it left no room for argument. She smiled. “If it *is* true, A-Xian, you’ve had the honour of meeting my older son, but you still haven’t met little A-Ling. Here.”

And she stepped over, and placed the baby Jin Ling in Wei Wuxian’s arms. He squeaked, adjusting his grip with a smile so bright it lifted Sizhui’s heart a little, and Jiang Yanli turned to the grown Jin Ling.

“You’re so tall,” she said, her eyes sparkling. “And you look so much like A-Cheng...” There were tears in Jin Ling’s eyes even as he beamed, and Sizhui could see his shoulders puff up just a little with pride at being compared to his uncle again. Jiang Yanli hesitated for a moment, and then held out her arms, and Jin Ling rushed towards her, falling into the hug so eagerly that she was knocked back a few steps. But Jiang Yanli just laughed, and stroked back Jin Ling’s hair, and Sizhui smiled slightly.

“Gongzi,” said Wen Ning, and Sizhui jumped. He hadn’t noticed the man emerging from the shadows, and neither had Jiang-zongzhu or Jin Zixuan, based on the way their hands twitched towards their swords.

Wei Wuxian still hadn’t noticed. He was too busy staring down at baby Jin Ling, looking utterly mesmerised.

“Wei-qianbei,” Sizhui murmured, and Wei Wuxian looked up at him in a daze, blinking back tears.

“A-Yuan...”

“Wen-xiansheng is here,” said Sizhui, and Wei Wuxian blinked again, before grinning wider, and holding up the baby.

“Oh, Wen Ning! Have you seen my tiny nephew?”

Wen Ning smiled slightly, peering over without coming any closer. “He is very cute, Jin-gongzi, Jin-furen. But, uh, Wei-gongzi, it might be best if you, uh – if you don’t carry him any further up the path.”

Wei Wuxian stiffened. “What’s wrong?”

To Sizhui’s surprise, Wen Ning’s smile grew a little stronger, if more wry. “Well, A-Yuan – I mean our A-Yuan, the little one, he was a little... surprised at meeting A-Yu, and, uh, Popo thinks he’s jealous.”

“Jealous?” Wei Wuxian blinked. “Of what?”

Jiang Yanli sighed. “Oh, A-Xian...” She took the baby from his arms, eliciting a whine of protest from Wei Wuxian – one that instantly stopped when she reached up to tuck his hair behind his ear and poke his nose. At that, Wei Wuxian gave his sister a smile brighter than any Sizhui had ever seen, and Sizhui couldn’t help but smile.

“A-Yu?” said Hanguang Jun slowly, staring at Jingyi cautiously, and Sizhui winced. This was not going to go down well.

Given that he was currently turning the same shade of red as the blood on his robes, Jingyi seemed to be thinking the same thing. “Hanguang Jun, I was separated from Sizhui and Zizhen and Jin Ling on the way here, and I landed in Cloud Recesses,” he said quickly. “But Jin Guangyao was there too, Jin Guangyao from our time, and when he figured out when we were and who A-Yu was, he tried to kill him! So I...”

“Kidnapped him,” supplied Jin Ling unhelpfully.

“Rescued!” snapped Jingyi.

“Guys...” Zizhen sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose.

“When Lan Jingyi caught up with us, he had A-Yu with him,” said Wei Wuxian. “Wen Ning took him here to be safe.”

Hanguang Jun looked no less convinced. “Jin Guangyao?”

“The sooner we get home, the sooner we get the whole story,” said Wei Wuxian, gazing imploringly at Hanguang Jun, who paused, and then gave a single nod. Wei Wuxian seemed to relax slightly, but his face grew more serious. “Wen Ning, does everyone know...?”

“I told A-Jie everything, but she said not to tell the others the details before we knew more certainly. I’m... not sure she believed me. But they know that we ran into trouble on the road,

and that company's coming, but not to, well..." Wen Ning shrugged a little awkwardly. "For the most part everyone's inside."

Wei Wuxian nodded. "Okay..." He turned back to the others, his face grave. "The people that live here... For some of them it will be alarming to see so many armed cultivators. I ask that you will respect that."

"We will," said Jiang Yanli, before anyone else could speak, and Wei Wuxian smiled at her.

"Thank you, Shijie," he murmured, bowing, and then he looped his arm through Sizhui's. "Come on then," he called, his voice suddenly cheerful. Sizhui couldn't be sure, but he thought it sounded forced. "It's this way."

## Chapter End Notes

Phew, a lot happened in this chapter, but I couldn't decide where to cut it so you got it all! I hope you enjoyed it, thank you very much for reading!

# Chapter 7

## Chapter Notes

Just a quick note - this story will mainly follow the canon of the TV show, and in that regard I'm going with the 'Wei Wuxian came back looking like Wei Wuxian' interpretation rather than him looking like Mo Xuanyu. Later in the story there'll be more discussion of this/mentions of certain implications but for now the juniors recognise him as Wei Wuxian because that's what he looked like in their time, too. I hope that makes sense!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The path was less overgrown than it had been when Sizhui last visited the Burial Mounds, but it was still thin and winding, and for the most part they walked two or three at a time. Hanguang Jun walked on Wei Wuxian's other side, his face stubbornly blank, and his grip on Bichen still firm. Wen Ning was taking up the rear, and the others formed a little train between them.

They had almost reached the Demon Subdue Palace when the quiet was broken by a squeal of "*Xian-gege!*" and a toddler pelting down the path to throw himself at Wei Wuxian's leg. "You're back!"

Wei Wuxian smiled. "Hello, A-Yuan. Aren't you supposed to be-"

But little A-Yuan had seen Hanguang Jun, and he cut off Wei Wuxian with a gasp, his eyes going wide, and he gave a bright smile that Sizhui humbly thought was absolutely adorable. "Rich-gege? Rich-gege, Rich-gege came back!"

With that, the boy pushed away from Wei Wuxian and sprang on Hanguang Jun, hugging his thigh and beaming up at him, and Hanguang Jun smiled softly.

"Hello, A-Yuan. Your Xian-gege was talking. It is rude to interrupt."

A-Yuan nodded eagerly, snuggling closer to Hanguang Jun's leg and peering up at the others. A shiver ran down Sizhui's spine as their eyes met, and A-Yuan frowned slightly, tilting his head to the side. He looked between Sizhui and Hanguang Jun, and then back, and then he gripped Hanguang Jun's leg a little tighter, and gazed back at the others.

Zizhen gave a little wave, and Jingyi scrunched up his nose with a grin, and A-Yuan smiled, and then his eyes moved behind them, to Jiang Yanli, Jin Ling, and Jin Zixuan.

A-Yuan froze. Noticing the boy's attention fixed on him, Jin Zixuan gave a small smile, bowing his head, but A-Yuan gasped, and then he whimpered, shaking his head.

“No – no, no, no!”

“A-Yuan?” Hanguang Jun asked, his hand reaching down to rest on A-Yuan’s shoulder as the boy’s whimpers grew louder, became sobs, and Jin Zixuan’s smile fell away, and A-Yuan *screamed*.

“No, no, no, no!”

Quick as lightning, Hanguang Jun leant down to pick A-Yuan up, but Wei Wuxian was even quicker, and A-Yuan’s little arms locked around his Xian-gege’s neck as he shrieked.

“A-Yuan, it’s alright,” Wei Wuxian said quickly, stroking his hair and holding him close. “It’s okay, I’m here –”

But A-Yuan wailed louder, his entire, tiny body shaking with sobs as he wrapped himself tightly around Wei Wuxian. “No, no, no!”

“Zixuan, A-Ling, step back!” said Jiang Yanli quickly, snatching the sword from her husband’s hand and throwing it to the ground as the two Jin hastened to obey. The baby in her arms began to cry.

“A-Yuan, A-Yuan, you’re safe,” Wei Wuxian promised, “Shh now, I’m here, I’m here. It’s okay, it’s okay.”

“No!” A-Yuan sobbed, clutching at Wei Wuxian’s hair. “No, no leave A-Yuan! Don’t take A-Yuan!”

“No one is leaving A-Yuan,” Wei Wuxian promised, glancing up at Sizhui with pain-filled eyes as he said it. “No one is leaving, and no one is taking A-Yuan anywhere. Xian-gege won’t let them.”

But A-Yuan sobbed harder, shaking his head. “Xian-gege, Xian-gege, the Bad Men are here. Bad Men hurt Xian-gege, take A-Yuan!”

“No one will hurt Xian-gege,” said Hanguang Jun firmly. “No one will take A-Yuan.”

A-Yuan drew in a choking breath, peeling his face from Wei Wuxian’s shoulder just far enough to glance at Hanguang Jun. There were tears streaking down his cheeks, and his face was white as Sizhui’s robes, and he looked completely, utterly, terrified.

“Rich, Rich-gege,” he sobbed. “No let Bad Man take A-Yuan!”

“No,” agreed Hanguang Jun, with all the solemnity of a vow. “Will let no one take A-Yuan.”

Lip trembling, the boy ventured another look back at Jin Zixuan and Jin Ling, but then he wailed, burying his face in Wei Wuxian’s shoulder again.

“It’s alright, A-Yuan,” Wei Wuxian swore, stroking his hair, but when he looked over A-Yuan’s head his eyes were burning with rage. “Jin Zixuan, did you ever visit the prison camps?”

“No,” said Jin Zixuan, his voice quiet, and strangled. He was watching A-Yuan with an expression of utter horror, and he broke his gaze just long enough to meet Wei Wuxian’s eyes. “I swear to you, I never went to that place.”

Hurried footsteps rushed over, and Sizhui looked up. Two women were hurrying over – one old and distantly familiar, the other young, with eyes as sharp as the needles in her hands – and when the older woman saw Jin Zixuan she gasped, stopping dead in her tracks and flinching back.

“Wei Wuxian,” said the younger woman, who could only be Wen Qing.

The older woman breathed out slowly, pushing her hand to her chest and then hurrying to Wei Wuxian’s side. “A-Yuan,” she said, “A-Yuan, it’s not him. It’s a different Jin-gongzi, it isn’t – it isn’t one of the bad men. Come, A-Yuan, come with Popo now. Let Wei-gongzi deal with the guests –”

But A-Yuan screamed again, louder and more desperate. “No! Xian-gege no, no, no! No!”

Wei Wuxian threw a desperate look at Popo, who shook her head slightly.

“Every... every time a young master of the Jin sect took someone away, they... they did not come back,” she whispered, her eyes flickering nervously towards Jin Zixuan, and A-Yuan howled.

“Popo,” Wei Wuxian said slowly, his voice trembling with rage. “When you say Jin-gongzi...”

Popo glanced back anxiously. “It wasn’t, wasn’t either of those young masters.”

“Did you ever see them at the camps? Either of them?” Wei Wuxian demanded, and Popo shook her head.

“No, Wei-gongzi. I – I only remember two who came to the camps that the guard addressed as Jin-gongzi... I don’t remember ever seeing them.” She nodded back towards Jin Zixuan and Jin Ling, her face creased with worry.

Wen Ning nodded. “Jin Zixun and Jin Guangyao were the only ones I saw. I, I never saw Jin Zixuan-gongzi there, Wei-gongzi. Not once.”

Sizhui glanced over at Jin Zixuan, who looked very much like he was going to be sick, and then back at Wei Wuxian. The fury on the second man’s face was almost frightening, but then he closed his eyes, and sorrow washed the fury away. He pressed a kiss to A-Yuan’s head, rocking him gently.

“Okay,” he murmured. “It’s okay, now, A-Yuan. No one’s going to hurt you. No one’s going to hurt me. Xian-gege is here. You’re safe. I promise. Hush now, A-Yuan. Hush now. I’m here.” Slowly, A-Yuan’s desperate sobs quieted into small whimpers. “That’s it... A-Yuan is very brave,” Wei Wuxian said, and his eyes flickered up to Sizhui. He smiled sadly. “A-Yuan is very brave.”



Sizhui sniffed, and with a start he realised that there were tears halfway down his own cheeks. He rubbed them away quickly.

“A-Yuan not brave,” mumbled the toddler, his words mangled by the tail of end of his whimpering.

“A-Yuan is *very* brave,” repeated Wei Wuxian, “but A-Yuan doesn’t need to be afraid. No one here will hurt him. There’re no bad men here. Just some people who look a little like the bad men, but they’re not. I promise. Jin Ling, could you come over here?”

Sizhui glanced back at Jin Ling in time to see his eyes widen. He swallowed, eyes flickering between Sizhui and A-Yuan. “Is... is that a good idea?”

“Yes,” said Wei Wuxian firmly, and Jin Ling swallowed again. Then he nodded, and walked over to Wei Wuxian more slowly and carefully than Sizhui had ever seen him move. “Now, A-Yuan, there’s a boy here who looks like the Bad Men. He isn’t. His name is Jin Ling, and he is the son of my shijie. Remember me telling you about my shijie? How wonderful she is?” A-Yuan’s little head nodded into Wei Wuxian’s chest. “Well, Jin Ling is her son, so he must be just as wonderful. Can you say hello to Jin Ling, A-Yuan?”

Jin Ling was standing so still Sizhui was half convinced he’d been struck by a talisman, and slowly, A-Yuan peeked out at him. He whimpered, grabbing tighter at Wei Wuxian, who hummed gently.

“Look at him, A-Yuan. He’s not a bad man, is he?”

A-Yuan stared for a long moment, and then he looked back at Popo. At her nod, he shook his head.

“Looks like Bad Man,” he mumbled. “But Ling-gege maybe not Bad Man.”

“That’s right,” said Wei Wuxian firmly. “Ling-gege is not a Bad Man. And neither is this man.” He strode towards Jin Zixuan, and A-Yuan gave a little squeak, clinging tighter still. “I know he looks even more like a bad man, but he’s not. If he was a bad man, would I do this?” He reached out and prodded Jin Zixuan in the arm. A-Yuan choked, but Jin Zixuan didn’t move, and Wei Wuxian prodded him again, poking his chest, and then his cheeks, and then his nose. Jin Zixuan’s eyelids fluttered slightly, as though he was fighting the urge to roll his eyes, but otherwise he stayed very still until Wei Wuxian had finished. Then, he bowed, very slowly.

“I am sorry that those in my sect have made you afraid, and hurt your family,” he said to A-Yuan softly. “But I can promise you I will not hurt you, or your... Xian-gege, or anyone else here. I – I am not here to be a bad man.”

A-Yuan curled into Wei Wuxian’s side, and Sizhui didn’t think he looked wholly convinced.

“Doesn’t... doesn’t *sound* like a Bad Man...”

“He isn’t a Bad Man,” said Wei Wuxian again, reaching out to prod him again. “See? A-Yuan try.”

He stepped closer to Jin Zixuan, but A-Yuan clung to him like a limpet. To Sizhui’s surprise, Wei Wuxian responded by passing the toddler Chenqing. Jin Zixuan’s eyes widened slightly, but he continued to stay very still as A-Yuan tapped quickly at his chest with the flute. When the man didn’t respond, A-Yuan prodded him again, and then he poked at Jin Zixuan’s cheek twice, until Wei Wuxian covered his hand.

“Careful of his eyes, A-Yuan,” he said.

A-Yuan drew back the flute, frowning thoughtfully at Jin Zixuan. Then, he stuck the end of Chenqing in his mouth, and began to chew on it.

“See?” murmured Wei Wuxian. “A-Yuan is safe. And...” A small, almost shy smile slipped across his lips as he sidestepped to hold the toddler in front of his sister. “This is my shijie, Jiang Yanli.”

A-Yuan’s eyes widened slightly. “The, the Shijie that made soup for A-Yuan?”

Jiang Yanli laughed, a light, gentle sound. “Wen-gongzi told me he was taking some back for you. Did you like it, A-Yuan?”

A-Yuan nodded eagerly.

“Then I shall have to make you some more, later,” said Jiang Yanli, and A-Yuan beamed, a smile so bright it looked like all his fear had vanished.

“Thank you, Xian-gege’s shijie Jiang Yanli!”

Jiang Yanli laughed again. “Perhaps it might be easier to call me Li-gugu? Would you like that?” A-Yuan nodded happily, and Jiang Yanli smiled. Then, something steeled in her eyes, and she looked at Wei Wuxian. Her voice was sweet as ever, and A-Yuan didn’t seem to notice, but Wei Wuxian began to pale at her next words. “What a wonderful surprise to meet a nephew as lovely as you.”

Wei Wuxian gave a nervous laugh, nodding slightly and backing away from his sister. Sizhui suspected that Wei Wuxian’s assertion Yanli ‘knew about Wen Yuan’ was not entirely accurate. “That’s right,” he said, “A-Yuan is very lovely, and Shijie is wonderful. Speaking of introductions, A-Yuan, you remember Jiang Cheng? He came to visit us before.”

A-Yuan looked at Jiang-zongzhu, his head tilting to the side slightly. Then he shook his head. “No.”

Wei Wuxian blinked. “No?”

Jiang-zongzhu frowned, and A-Yuan shook his head again.

“Don’t remember.”

“Wei Wuxian, that was over a year ago,” said Wen Qing wryly. “A-Yuan is three. He can’t be expected to remember someone he met for five minutes one afternoon.”

Wei Wuxian and Jiang-zongzhu both looked rather put out by that, but A-Yuan grinned, pointing at Hanguang Jun.

“Remember Rich-gege!” he declared, beaming, and Hanguang Jun smiled back.

Jiang-zongzhu made a noise of disgust. “Wei Wuxian...”

“What? It’s not my fault you never visited again,” muttered Wei Wuxian mutinously, and Jiang-zongzhu glared at him. A-Yuan seemed to pick up on the tension, shifting uncomfortably, and Wei Wuxian wiped the scowl of his own face with a smile, jogging the boy on his hip and pointing at Zizhen and Jingyi. “There are friends too, A-Yuan. This is Ouyang Zizhen and Lan Jingyi.” Then he turned, and his smile softened. “And this is Sizhui.”

Sizhui bowed, smiling slightly, and A-Yuan tilted his head, his little fingers entangling in Wei Wuxian’s hair. His eyes flickered between Sizhui and Hanguang Jun, and then he smiled. “Hello!”

“Hello,” Sizhui replied, smiling back, and A-Yuan giggled.

“Now, A-Yuan,” said Wei Wuxian, putting on a more serious face. “I need to have a talk with Rich-gege and the others inside, but it’s going to be very long and boring. I think A-Yuan should go with Popo and Sishu and have something nice to eat.”

The laughter in A-Yuan’s eyes died, and he stiffened, shaking his head. “No. No, A-Yuan stay with Xian-gege.”

Wei Wuxian pouted. “But A-Yuan would be bored.”

“No,” A-Yuan whimpered, but Hanguang Jun stepped forward.

“A-Yuan,” he said sombrely. “There are no bad men here. I will protect your Xian-gege.” He paused, taking something out of his sleeve, and Sizhui’s breath caught in his throat. From the second he saw the flash of sky-blue silk, he knew what it was. “This is for A-Yuan,” Hanguang Jun said, his voice softening. “This will protect A-Yuan.”

*“I don’t, I don’t wanna go!” he sobbed, clinging to the side of his Baba’s bed. Just like yesterday, and the day before, and the day before, Baba was lying as still as stone on his stomach, his head turned to the side to look at A-Yuan. And just like yesterday, and the day before, and the day before, as soon as Bobo said it was time to go, he had closed his eyes, and A-Yuan’s heart had broken. “A-Yuan stay with Baba, A-Yuan stay with Baba!”*

*“A-Yuan,” said Bobo, his voice tight with what A-Yuan would one day learn was pain. “Baba will be here tomorrow.”*

*A-Yuan whimpered, pressing himself closer to the bed and grappling for Baba’s sleeve. “But, but Lan Qi-qianbei says I should, I should only come once, once a month, and –”*

*“Xiongzhang,” Baba breathed, his eyes flying open, and even at three years old, A-Yuan could hear the fear in his voice. He whimpered again, and Baba’s hand covered his own.*

*“I have spoken to Lan Qi-qianbei,” said Bobo, squeezing A-Yuan’s shoulder. “It has been agreed that given the circumstances it would do A-Yuan more harm to prevent daily visits. A-Yuan can come back tomorrow, and the day after that, and the day after that. I promise, Wangji.”*

*But Baba’s hand tightened around A-Yuan’s, and his eyes narrowed. “But only if he behaves?” he gritted out.*

*“Wangji...” begged Bobo, and A-Yuan didn’t understand.*

*“A-Yuan, A-Yuan will be good, A-Yuan will be very good,” he promised, but Baba made a noise like he was in pain, and closed his eyes again, and A-Yuan panicked. “I’m sorry, A-Yuan sorry -”*

*His uncle crouched down beside him, rubbing his back. “No, A-Yuan, there’s no need to be sorry. You’ve done nothing wrong. It is important to follow the rules, and to behave well, but no matter what happens I will always bring you to see your father. Family... family is important.”*

*Baba’s hand squeezed A-Yuan’s even tighter.*

*“Come on, now, A-Yuan,” murmured Bobo. “It’s getting late. Soon it will be bedtime.”*

*A-Yuan tried, but he couldn’t help but sob again. “Can, can I please stay with Baba? Please Bobo, please!”*

*“No, A-Yuan. Baba needs to rest,” said Bobo, his voice still gentle, and Baba’s eyes widened slightly.*

*Baba let go of A-Yuan’s hand and pushed himself up slightly to reach into his other sleeve. His jaw was clenched, and even A-Yuan could see that his entire body was trembling with the effort.*

*“Wangji –”*

*Breathing heavily, Baba fell back onto the bed, and held out his hand. In it was a small doll in the shape of a rabbit, made from sky-blue silk, with a sombre little face stitched in silver thread. “For A-Yuan,” he murmured. “Keep A-Yuan company, while Baba is here.”*

*A-Yuan took the small toy rabbit from his father’s hands. It looked bigger in his own fingers, and it was so soft, and it was snuggly and cute, and when he hugged it close, he noticed that it smelled like Baba.*

*“Thank you, Baba,” he mumbled, and Baba gave a small, sad smile.*

*“You are welcome. A-Yuan will never be alone.”*

Automatically, Sizhui's hand twitched towards his Qiankun sleeve, to where even now, Tuzi was tucked away safely beneath his spare robes. As a child, he'd carried the toy with him everywhere he went, until he turned six, and Lan Qiren said he was too old for such things. Then, Sizhui had to keep Tuzi beneath his pillow instead. But while teaching him what to pack on the eve of his first Night Hunt, Hanguang Jun had pulled Tuzi out from beneath his pillow, his mouth crooking into a small smile. Sizhui had been sure he'd seen his father put it back afterwards, but a day later when he was rifling through his bag for something to eat, his fingers had grazed the soft silk of his little rabbit.

He had taken it on every Night Hunt since.

"Sizhui?"

He jumped, glancing at Jingyi. His friend's lips were pursed tightly, his brow furrowed low with concern. Sizhui smiled slightly. "I'm okay." But then his smile faded, and he grabbed Jingyi's arm, turning back to Wei Wuxian. He had just deposited A-Yuan into Popo's waiting arms, the boy seeming much happier now that the rabbit was in his hands. "Wei-qianbei? I'm sorry to interrupt but you said that when we got back Wen-guniang might take a look at Jingyi's back, and we're here now..."

"Sizhui, I'm fine," said Jingyi, but Sizhui glared at him, and his friend's eyes widened. Wisely, he kept his mouth shut.

"Your back?" asked Wen Qing, her eyes narrowing, and then she stalked around Jingyi like a cat circling a flightless bird. She gave a low hiss, and Sizhui's stomach curled uncomfortably. "When did this happen?"

"The day before yesterday," Sizhui said softly.

Wen Qing's eyes narrowed a little further, and she took Jingyi's wrist, pushing her fingers against his pulse points. After a moment, she shook her head.

"Alright," she said. "This will only take a minute. Wei Wuxian, you get our guests settled. Lan-gongzi, if you'll come this way."

Wen Qing led Jingyi into the Demon Subdue Palace, and Wei Wuxian gestured for the others to follow.

"They'll be in the back room," he said. "We won't disturb them. Popo, I do not think the stories that must be told now would be appropriate for A-Yuan. If you can keep him out here..."

"Of course, Wei-gongzi," said Popo, carrying A-Yuan away to the small, wooden house built against the sides of the mountain. Nostalgia tugged at Sizhui's heart as he stared at it, but Zizhen nudged his arm, and they followed Wei Wuxian into the cave.

Leading them into the most open part of the palace, Wei Wuxian sat himself down on the floor, only to leap back to his feet again with a hurried 'Just a moment!' disappearing into the

back of the cave. He came back a moment later with a blanket, old and worn but clean, and he folded it neatly, placing it on the floor and smiling almost shyly at his sister.

“Thank you, Xianxian,” said Jiang Yanli, reaching out to tuck Wei Wuxian’s hair behind his ear. His eyes filled with tears, but he also smiled, nodding his head. Jiang Yanli sat down, and Jiang-zongzhu sat beside her, with Jin Zixuan taking her other side. After only a moment’s hesitation, Jin Ling sat down beside his father, and Sizhen took the spot beside him. Leaving a space for Jingyi in between them, Sizhui settled himself next, the curve of the circle meaning he was almost opposite Jiang Yanli, and his heart rose as Wei Wuxian sat beside him. Unsurprisingly, Hanguang Jun sat at Wei Wuxian’s other side, and a hesitant Wen Ning sat beside him, leaving a particularly large gap between himself and Jiang-zongzhu.

And then they waited. Baby Jin Ling gurgled, and Jiang Yanli cooed at him softly, rocking him in her arms. Suddenly, Jin Zixuan broke the silence.

“Are any of the rest of you hurt? We didn’t ask...”

“Sizhui...” Zizhen began, but Sizhui shook his head slightly.

“It’s okay,” he said, curling up his fingers so his hands wouldn’t twitch up towards the cuts on his face. “They aren’t deep, and I haven’t felt them at all since I got my spiritual energy back.”

“And what about your wrist?” demanded Jin Ling. “You yelled pretty loud when the Ghost – when Wen-xiansheng grabbed it.”

Oh... To be honest, Sizhui had forgotten about his wrist – it did ache a little, but he could move his fingers without a problem, and the pain was really quite dull now.

Beside him, Wei Wuxian stiffened, staring at him with eyes wide with concern. “You did.”

Wen Ning cringed back, horror in his eyes. “I’m sorry!”

“Oh, no, it’s alright!” Sizhui said quickly, smiling and wiggling his fingers. “I’m fine.”

Wei Wuxian’s eyes narrowed, and he grabbed Sizhui’s elbow, pushing up his sleeves to reveal a faint, hand-shaped bruise. Earlier, it had probably looked quite bad, but Sizhui was a strong cultivator. By late evening, it would likely be gone altogether. Wei Wuxian hummed in the back of his throat.

“Really, it’s fine,” Sizhui promised, leaning forward a little to better meet Wen Ning’s eye. “I’d forgotten it happened, honestly! It hardly hurts at all. And even if it was worse, it wouldn’t be your fault, Wen-xiansheng. I tackled you from behind, you were only defending yourself.”

Wei Wuxian made a noise of agreement, pulling Sizhui’s sleeve back down. “That’s true.” He met Sizhui’s eyes. “You’re sure you’re alright?”

Sizhui nodded. “I promise. Lying is against the rules.”

Wei Wuxian made a strangled noise, putting hand against his chest, and for a moment Sizhui's stomach dropped, but then the man turned to Hanguang Jun with a face of utter betrayal. "What have you done to my A-Yuan? Lying is against the rules – bah!"

Hanguang Jun raised his eyebrows. "It is a problem that he will not lie to you?"

"A-Yuan would never lie to me!" Wei Wuxian cried indignantly, and Sizhui felt laughter rise in his chest. "Neither of my A-Yuans would, they're good boys!"

"Then I do not see what the issue is," said Hanguang Jun simply, and Wei Wuxian scowled.

"It's the phrasing!" he said. "Little boys aren't made to follow rules! They're made to fall out of trees and into lotus ponds!"

"That sounds unsafe."

"Listen here, Sizhui," said Wei Wuxian, wagging his finger at Sizhui as though he was a toddler. "Rules, like wards, are made to be broken."

"Not true."

At that moment, Wen Qing and Jingyi returned, and Wei Wuxian looked up in a clear expectation of back-up.

"Wen Qing, the Lans have corrupted your cousin!" he declared, as Jingyi settled in between Sizhui and Zizhen.

Wen Qing raised a single eyebrow at Wei Wuxian. "How so?"

Wei Wuxian pointed at Sizhui again. "He just said, and I quote: lying is against the rules."

"I see," said Wen Qing, her eyes narrowing slightly as they fell on Sizhui. "My cousin..."

"Jie," said Wen Ning, a little hesitantly. "This is A-Yuan – from the future."

"You said," said Wen Qing, still studying Sizhui intently.

It was difficult not to squirm under such a glance, but Sizhui found he didn't mind too much. "I understand it must be difficult to believe," he admitted. Frankly, it was still hard to believe it himself. "But if you let us, I promise we'll explain everything."

Wen Qing bowed her head. "Then I will listen." She paused for a moment, and then nodded at Jingyi. "Lan-gongzi will be fine. The wounds were cruel and deep, and they will scar, but they're healing well."

"Thank you, Wen-guniang," Zizhen said, and Sizhui found himself copying his words quite by instinct. He felt a little bit sick – he knew that Wen Qing was a doctor, and he knew that doctors did not describe wounds as 'cruel and deep' without reason. His worry must have shown on his face, because Jingyi pressed his knee against Sizhui's.

“I’m okay,” he promised quietly. “She gave me something for the pain – I feel much better.”

Sizhui offered his friend a weak smile, very aware that the room around them had gone silent. He turned his face to look at Wei Wuxian, who nodded.

It was time to tell a story.

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading, and a huge thank you to everyone who has already commented, bookmarked, and left kudos, I really, really appreciate it! Until next time, take care!



## Chapter 8

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“I think,” Wei Wuxian said slowly, deliberately, “that the best way to do this is to take it chronologically. Jin Zixuan and I will explain what *we* saw today, and then our... younger guests... can tell us what happened from that point in their original timeline.” He turned to Sizhui. “I’m sure a lot happened in sixteen years, but try and tell us anything you can think of that’s relevant. If you keep it as chronological as you can, that should make it easier to follow. We’ll try and keep an open mind. Won’t we, Jiang Cheng?”

Jiang-zongzhu rolled his eyes. “Shut up. Just tell us what happened this morning.”

“How can I tell you what happened if I shut up?” retorted Wei Wuxian, and Sizhui thought he could see a sparkle of mischief in the man’s eye. Jiang Yanli smiled faintly.

“A-Xian, A-Cheng, that’s enough,” she said. “A-Xian, what happened?”

The sparkle in Wei Wuxian’s eye died, and he shifted, recounting with a sigh the attempt Jin Zixun had made on his life when he reached Qionggqi Pass. Jin Zixuan nodded along when Wei Wuxian described his arrival and the ensuing argument, and the arrival of Sizhui and the others. When Wei Wuxian had finished, Jin Zixuan added that he arrived when he did thanks to Jin Guangyao’s ‘accidental’ confession that something was wrong.

Then, they turned to Sizhui.

“You seemed to believe that what happened today was something more than the rash decision of Zixun, Lan-gongzi,” said Jin Zixuan. “And you spoke of a demonic cultivator, on the other hill?”

“Mn.” Sizhui took a deep breath. “Jin-zongzhu agreed to invite Wei-qianbei to Jin Ling’s one-month celebration because it would give him an opportunity to ambush him. He wants the Stygian Tiger Amulet, but he needed an excuse to attack, when the other Clan Leaders were so reluctant. Su She was the one who cursed Jin Zixun, not Wei-qianbei, and he was the one they placed on the other hill. By taking control of Wen-gongzi from Wei-qianbei, he could create chaos and a conflict, and make sure that if Wei-qianbei wasn’t killed, there would be reason to hunt him down. I don’t – I don’t know if Jin Guangyao meant for Jin Zixuan to be killed, but... In the life we lived, he was. And Jin Guangshan had an excuse to come for the Burial Mounds.”

Sizhui paused. Already, those listening looked shaken – Jiang Yanli was very pale, her eyes flickering between her husband and Wei Wuxian as she clutched her baby tighter against her chest, but then she caught Sizhui’s gaze, and swallowed.

“Go on, Lan-gongzi,” she murmured, and Sizhui nodded –

But it took a moment for the words to come. The fallout from Jin Zixuan's death was a story he knew like the back of his hand, but it had never been a tale Sizhui liked to tell. It was so full of death, and it always made Hanguang Jun so sad and Zewu Jun so quiet, and now it was even worse. Once, it had been a part of history that his father and uncle happened to be a part of, but now it was a prophecy – the memory of a future that saw Wei Wuxian fall from the cliffs of Nightless City, that saw the refugees in the Burial Mounds – Sizhui's *family* – slaughtered. A future that saw nearly the deaths of nearly half the people in this room.

Now, it had never happened, but it had never felt so real to Sizhui.

Still – it was a story that had to be told, and there wasn't really anyone else to do it. Sizhui wasn't sure how much Zizhen knew, and Jin Ling had gone very white and very still. Jingyi knew it as well as he did, but Jingyi had a habit of wandering off on tangents when he told stories, and though Sizhui usually loved listening to the tangled webs of his friend's tales, now wasn't really the time.

So Sizhui took another deep breath, and forced his voice to be steady.

“Wen-gongzi brought Wei-qianbei back to the Burial Mounds,” he said, “and Jin Guangshan sent word. He claimed that if Wen Qing and Wen Qionglin delivered themselves to Jinlintai, he would consider the matter over. So – so they went, and the rest of the Wens went with them. I was hidden here, but Wei-qianbei, Wei-qianbei didn't know... I don't know if, how...”

“I would have used needles,” Wen Qing said softly, staring at Wei Wuxian. There was a stark horror on the man's face, and Sizhui looked down quickly at his hands. “He would never have let us go without him.” She paused, and Sizhui felt her gaze shift to him. Unable to help it, Sizhui looked up. For a moment, he had the uncomfortable feeling that he was being studied, but then something in her gaze grew sad, and her chin rose. “Jin-zongzhu... I imagine he did not deem imprisonment punishment enough?”

A lump rose in Sizhui's throat, but he swallowed it down. “No. He – he killed everyone. Everyone that was living here.”

Wen Qing's eyes fluttered closed, and Wei Wuxian gave a strangled cry.

“Everyone?” It almost sounded like he was begging.

Sizhui hung his head and nodded. “Everyone... except me. Because I was... I was still here...”

Jingyi pressed his knee against Sizhui's, a silent comfort, and Sizhui swallowed. Cleared his throat.

“The Clans met at Nightless City, and... and pledged to destroy Wei-qianbei. He... he met them there, and there was a battle. A big one. But, but Jiang Yanli came onto the battlefield. I don't know why, but she did, and...”

It was at that moment Sizhui made the mistake of looking at Wei Wuxian again. There was a terror on his face so strong that for a moment Sizhui was back in the Guanyin temple, screaming as the sword was wrenched from his father's gut. It was the only other time he'd seen Wei Wuxian so horrified, and it took Sizhui a moment to catch his breath, and brace himself, and continue.

"Su She began to play," said Sizhui quietly. "He made the dead into puppets. Everyone assumed it was Wei Wuxian. And Jiang Yanli was killed in the fray."

"Shijie," Wei Wuxian whispered, his voice breaking, and across the circle Jiang Wanyin was trembling, his eyes wide and horrified. Even to Sizhui, he looked like a child, afraid and confused and hurting. Jiang Yanli took his hand, squeezing it gently, and then she met Wei Wuxian's eyes.

"I'm here, A-Xian," she promised quietly. "I'm here."

Swallowing, Sizhui glanced at Jin Ling. He was staring at the ground, his lip trembling, and his knees shivered slightly, as though he was fighting to keep from drawing them up to his chest. His fingers were white around the clarity bell on his belt, and there were tears on his cheeks. Beside him, Jin Zixuan was marble, white and still, his hand resting on his wife's knee, but suddenly he moved, looking sharply down at Jin Ling, realisation dawning in his eyes. He opened his mouth, but then closed it again, reaching out slowly with his free hand to take Jin Ling's.

Jiang Yanli raised her head, and looked at Sizhui. "Lan-gongzi, what happened next?"

Almost unconsciously, Sizhui pressed his knee further into Jingyi's, and Jingyi squeezed his hand. "Wei-qianbei... Wei-qianbei..." Against his will, his voice trailed off, and no matter how many times he swallowed he couldn't shift the lump in his throat, and he looked at Jingyi helplessly.

"Wei-qianbei lost his mind," said Jingyi at once, his voice uncharacteristically soft. "He used the Stygian Tiger Seal and he killed... a lot of people. Then he broke the Seal in two, and one half was destroyed but then Jiang-zongzhu –"

Jin Ling look up sharply with a frantic shake of his head, but it was too late.

"Jiang-zongzhu what?" asked Jiang Wanyin slowly. His voice sounded thick, though with anger or tears Sizhui couldn't tell. Jingyi blushed slightly, looking down, and Jiang-zongzhu's voice rose "What? Say it!"

"They say you killed him yourself," said Jin Ling, his voice very small, and Jiang Wanyin froze. Sizhui saw Wei Wuxian close his eyes, heard Hanguang Jun's desperate gasp of pain, and he grappled with Jingyi's hand. Though his voice stayed small, Jin Ling somehow had the strength to look his uncle in the eye. "The battle was muddled, but... but people say they saw you kill him. I don't think you did. You said – you never really talked about it, not to me, but the times you did, the things you said... I don't think you landed a blow, Jiujiu. But either way, Wei Wuxian fell from the cliffs and... died."

All the anger had drained from Jiang Wanyin's face, leaving him pale and wide eyed and looking so *young*, and he shook his head desperately, his eyes fixed on Wei Wuxian.

"I wouldn't," he rasped, the shaking of his head growing faster. "I – I'd never, I couldn't – I – I – *A-Jie!*"

"You haven't done anything wrong, Jiang Cheng," Wei Wuxian murmured. "It's okay."

"Hush, A-Cheng," said Jiang Yanli, but she was looking almost green now. "I know..."

"You said Wei Wuxian sent you back here," said Jin Zixuan. "How could he do that if he was dead?"

"I'm sure we'll get there," Wei Wuxian murmured, looking at Sizhui. There were tears in his eyes, and his voice seemed to ache with pain as he spoke. "If I left you in the Burial Mounds, if, if everyone else was dead...."

Sizhui nodded. "Hanguang Jun found me," he said quietly. He wanted to look at his father, but his father wasn't there – this Hanguang Jun had never claimed him, and he would never have reason to. His father was gone. Jingyi's hand squeezed his tighter, and Sizhui realised with a start that his eyes were stinging with tears. He blinked them back, and swallowed. "Here. He found me here... I don't remember it at all, but Zewu Jun said it had been several days, and I was feverish... I barely remembered my own name. Hanguang Jun and Zewu Jun agreed that if I didn't remember who I was, it would be safer not to remind me until I was old enough to understand, so – so Hanguang Jun named me Lan Yuan, and gave me the courtesy name Sizhui, and inducted me into the clan. I always knew that my parents were dead, but... nothing else. Zewu Jun said they were going to tell me when I turned twenty." He paused, considering how best to continue the story, thinking carefully on what happened next chronologically. "I don't know exactly when, but I believe it was in the first year after the battle that Xue Yang came to Jinlintai."

Jiang-zongzhu hissed, and Wei Wuxian scowled. Out of the corner of his eye, Sizhui could see Hanguang Jun's jaw clench, and his hand close around Bichen's hilt.

"Xue Yang?" repeated Jin Zixuan, frowning. "Wasn't he that delinquent that murdered the Chang clan?"

"Yes," said Sizhui. "And the people of the Snow White Pavilion. But Chang Ping recounted his confession, and Jin Guangshan argued there was no evidence of his crimes. Xue Yang was locked away, but he wasn't killed." Unfortunately. "Then, a while after that happened, Jin Guangyao married Qin Su, and –"

"What happened to Xue Yang?" demanded Jiang-zongzhu.

"No interruptions," said Hanguang Jun, a bite of ice in his voice, and Sizhui saw Jiang-zongzhu's cheeks burn red.

"You–"

Jiang Yanli squeezed her brother's hand, and Jiang Wanyin's jaw clenched shut.

"I'm sorry, Jiang-zongzhu, but Wei-qianbei said that we should tell you everything chronologically," said Sizhui, trying not to shift uncomfortably when Jiang Wanyin looked back at him. "For a while, Xue Yang was locked in the dungeons of Jinlintai, and in that time, Jin Guangyao was married, and Mo Xuanyu came to Jinlintai."

"Mo Xuanyu?" repeated Jin Zixuan, the resigned dread in his eyes leading Sizhui to believe he could guess who the stranger was.

Sizhui nodded. "He is the son of the Second Lady of Mo, and Jin Guangshan. I think, now, he'd be about nine years old?" He glanced at Jin Ling, who considered it for a moment, and then nodded.

"Eight or nine, yeah."

Jin Zixuan closed his eyes for a moment, before looking wearily back at Sizhui. "Nine years old."

"Yes."

Jin Zixuan sighed. "Go on, Lan-gongzi."

"I never knew Mo Xuanyu," admitted Sizhui. "But he was..."

"Weird," said Jin Ling, but there was something in the twist of his face that almost looked regretful. "He was strange, and skittish, and he behaved oddly, and he was always interested in strange talismans and curses, and... demonic cultivation. I was four when he came to Jinlintai, and I never had much to do with him, but as he got older, he got more... I don't know... He started wearing makeup, really bad makeup, or wearing strange masks, and it got worse after Ye- after Jin Guangshan died."

Jin Zixuan took a deep breath. "When was that?"

"I was five," said Jin Ling quietly, running his thumb over the bell on his belt. Sizhui waited, but his friend didn't show any sign of continuing, so Sizhui took over again.

"After Jin Guangshan died, Xue Yang was officially executed, but instead he was released," he said. "At least, he was either released or escaped, but he was definitely working with Jin Guangyao. They used Xue Yang's Yin Iron to try and re-forged the Tiger Amulet – it wasn't as effective, but it worked. Then, about a year ago, Mo Xuanyu was kicked out of Jinlintai. He went back to Mo Village, but the Mo family treated him badly, very badly – and a couple of months after his return, he used the Sacrifice Summon to call Wei Wuxian back from the dead and seek revenge on his family..."

"The Sacrifice Summon?" Jiang Yanli asked quietly, looking at Wei Wuxian. His face was tight with discomfort, and he winced slightly as he looked at his shijie.

"It would destroy his soul entirely," he said, his voice hollow. "And bring mine back in its place."

“You looked like you, too,” said Jin Ling. “It brought your body back, too.”

Wei Wuxian’s eyes narrowed slightly, as though he was thinking on something, and he gave a slow nod. “Alright... So I came back... What happened then?”

Here, the story became easier to tell. For one thing, Sizhui had seen much of it with his own eyes, and for another, it was a little less dark. It was actually a little fun to talk of how Wei Wuxian had pretended to be mad at Mo Manner, now Sizhui knew how much the man had probably enjoyed himself. He explained about the appearance of the Blade Spirit, of Hanguang Jun, and then the disappearance of ‘Mo Xuanyu’, and the night-hunt at Dafan Mountain. The appearance of Wen Ning –

“Which was when you grabbed my throat and dangled me in the air,” said Jingyi unhelpfully, making Wen Ning bow his head and apologise profusely until Sizhui had to ask him to please stop.

Sizhui decided not to mention the confrontation with Jiang-zongzhu at Dafan Mountain, seeing no reason to make the man feel any guiltier than he clearly already did, and continued the story, talking of ‘Mo Xuanyu’s’ visit to Gusu, and his joining Hanguang Jun to hunt down the Blade Spirit. Then, the story reached Coffin Town.

“I have never, ever, in all my life tasted anything as awful as that congee,” said Jingyi firmly, staring in disgust at Wei Wuxian. “I thought my tongue was going to fall off.”

Zizhen and Jin Ling nodded in sombre agreement, and Sizhui rolled his eyes, and continued. And the story grew darker, and his voice felt heavy as he talked about what they had learnt from A-Qing, and the fates Song Lan and Xiao Xingchen had suffered at the hands of Xue Yang.

About finding the corpse of Nie Mingjue.

“Wait – Nie-zongzhu? Nie-zongzhu was dead?” blurted out Jiang Wanyin, and Sizhui nodded.

“Mn. He suffered qi deviation and disappeared, a few months before Jin Guangshan died. It had been years, by the time his body was found, but it seemed... preserved. And someone had taken his head.”

Wei Wuxian sighed heavily. “Poor Huaisang...”

Jin Ling took over the story then, speaking a little haltingly about the Cultivation Conference at Lanling, and the death of Qin Su, the reveal of Wei Wuxian’s identity. Hanguang Jun’s stand on the stairs – the disappearance of Wei Wuxian and Hanguang Jun. His voice faltered, and he went very red, but he didn’t say anything about stabbing Wei Wuxian at Jinlintai, and Sizhui kept his mouth shut, squeezing Jingyi’s hand tightly to make sure he did the same. With a small smile at Jin Ling, Sizhui took over the story again, recounting being kidnapped by mercenaries, dragged to the Demon Subdue Palace. Their rescue by Wei Wuxian, the confrontation with the other clans, Su She’s treachery, and the plot to kill them all. Wei Wuxian’s sacrifice at the Burial Mounds.

Wei Wuxian calling him A-Yuan. Wen Ning recognising him.

He didn't mention Jin Ling's breakdown on the docks.

"The clans all headed back to Lotus Pier after that," said Sizhui, glancing at Jin Ling. "There was a meeting, but I was outside with Wen-gongzi." Sizhui was very aware that he only knew the bare minimum about the things discussed in that meeting. He knew of Qin Su's parentage, of course, and that Sisi the prostitute had been forced to help kill Jin Guangshan, but when he asked how Jingyi had shuddered, and put a hand on his shoulder, and said quite seriously that Sizhui did not want to know. So Sizhui hadn't asked again. Now, he looked at Jin Ling. "Do you want to-"

"No," yelped Jin Ling, shaking his head and turning even redder than before. "Absolutely not."

Sizhui glanced at Jingyi, who sighed, and patted his knee. "Well, you were bound to learn the horrible details one day. I guess now you can get scarred like the rest of us."

And he told them everything.

Sizhui felt his cheeks burn as Jingyi spoke of the manner of Jin Guangshan's death, and his stomach lurched as if he was going to throw up when Jingyi repeated Jin Guangyao's words. "Don't stop, even if he's dead."

No wonder Jingyi hadn't told him.

Disgust and horror and alarm coloured the faces of those listening, and Jin Zixuan gagged, his face paler than any of them. He closed his eyes, bowing his head, and Sizhui felt very sorry for him. Hearing of such a horrible thing happening to a man he did not like and had never met was bad enough – he couldn't imagine what it must feel like when that man was your father.

When Jingyi had reported the deaths of all the women but Sisi, he paused, letting everyone breathe for a moment. Just a moment. And then he told the room about the origins of Qin Su.

"No," Jin Zixuan croaked, looking up sharply. He cleared his throat and shook his head, and when he spoke again there was a note of pleading in his voice. "My father, he – Qin Cangye is his friend, his subordinate, he –"

"A-Xuan," Jiang Yanli murmured, shifting the baby in her arms and releasing Jiang Wanyin's hand to take her husband's. She waited until he met her eyes, and then she smiled sadly. "We said that we would listen."

There were tears in Jin Zixuan's eyes, and anger in the clench of his jaw, and Sizhui's sympathy rose. When Jingyi spoke of Jin Rusong, and the suspicion that his own father had had him killed before he could grow old enough to show any signs of his parents' relationship, Jin Zixuan stood up abruptly. He barely made it three paces out of the circle before he threw up.

As if on cue, the baby began to cry, and Jiang Yanli eased him into Jiang-zongzhu's arms, before standing up gracefully and taking her husband's arm. Sizhui couldn't hear what she murmured to him, and he didn't want to.

Wordlessly, Wei Wuxian sent out a talisman, and the stench of vomit disappeared. Still, the baby howled, despite Jiang-zongzhu's slightly frantic humming and rocking.

After a long moment, Jin Zixuan nodded, turning back to the circle. Embarrassment had painted his cheeks red, but beneath it he still looked pale, and Sizhui thought he could see his hands trembling. He started to bow.

"Forgive-"

"Don't be an idiot," Wei Wuxian said, but his voice was gentle. "Do you need to take a break?"

Jin Zixuan shook his head, avoiding everyone's eye as he sat back down beside Jin Ling. Immediately, Jiang Yanli took her son from Jiang Wanyin's arms, depositing him into Jin Zixuan's instead, before sitting back down between the two of them. Jin Zixuan gazed down at his son, and then at the older Jin Ling, and then he closed his eyes on his tears. There was no sound besides the crying of the baby, but that eased too as his father rocked him, holding him close. When the infant was quiet, Jin Zixuan spoke again. He kept his eyes closed.

"Please continue, Lan-gongzi," he said, his voice hoarse, and Jingyi looked at Sizhui, his eyebrow raised in a silent offer.

Sizhui took a deep breath, sending back a small smile he knew Jingyi would be able to read. Sizhui didn't know if he could do this, but he would try.

"We went to Yunping – to the, to the Guanyin temple... I... we..." He closed his eyes, trying to pretend that he was back in Cloud Recesses, sitting in the classroom – to imagine that he was answering a question for Lan Qiren, clear and concise and accurate. With as much detail as he could, he recounted what Jin Guangyao had said at the temple, and the arrival of Su She and Nie Huaisang, and of Jiang-zongzhu. He didn't mention anything about golden cores, but he felt his own shudder as he glossed over the topic.

And then.

Then.

"Wei... Wei-qianbei started whistling, and – and Su She – Su She –" He tried to stop it, but a sob broke free from his throat, and Sizhui pushed his hand against his mouth, squeezing his eyes shut. The second his eyes closed he saw it again – the sword, his father, the *blood* –

Jingyi's grip on his hand grew painfully tight, and Sizhui squeezed back just as hard. "It's okay, Sizhui," Jingyi murmured. "I can... I can do it." He paused, and Sizhui could feel him bracing himself. "Su She stabbed Hanguang Jun through the stomach. It – it was bad."



At his side, Sizhui felt Wei Wuxian flinch violently, heard his almost-silent whimper, and Sizhui squeezed his eyes shut tighter.

He felt Jingyi take a deep breath. “Jin Guangyao stopped the bleeding, but he held Hanguang Jun’s life over us, he, he said he wouldn’t heal him until he was safe, and... and we were taken away, all of us, to... well, I don’t know where, but it had a dungeon, and they...”

“They took Jingyi away,” said Zizhen quietly, taking over as Jingyi’s voice choked. “So that we would do what they said. Jin Guangyao put Hanguang Jun in a coma, told us he wouldn’t let him wake up until Wei Wuxian had come up with a way to kill all the other clan leaders, and come up with a spell to wipe Zewu Jun’s memory of what had happened.”

Sizhui heard his father – *no, Hanguang Jun* – breathe in sharply, but he didn’t interrupt.

“After the first day, when, when he said Wei-qianbei hadn’t done enough Jin Guangyao whipped Jingyi and said, he said that if Wei Wuxian didn’t do as he said he’d torture Jingyi until he died, and then he’d take me, and then Sizhui, and Jin Ling if he had to, and...” Zizhen paused, and took a deep breath. “Wei-qianbei woke us up that night, and told us he could send us back, to now. He didn’t... didn’t tell us that... how the ritual...”

“How the ritual what?” asked Jiang-zongzhu, dread in his voice.

Jingyi filled the silence, his voice trembling. “They... Wei-qianbei, Zewu Jun, Jiang-zongzhu and Nie-zongzhu... they sent one of us back each, but they... to activate the array, they... killed themselves. All of them, they, they stabbed themselves in the heart and – and there was a moment when we didn’t, we didn’t go anywhere, and Jin Guangyao was furious and he burst into the cell and grabbed me, and Jin Ling had let go because he’d been trying to get to Jiang-zongzhu and when the array activated Jin Guangyao had the back of my collar and he was pulling and I couldn’t keep a grip on Sizhui and I got pulled away-” he broke off, and took a deep, shuddering breath. Then, he described what happened when he reached Gusu with a voice that trembled only a little.

For a moment, there was silence, but then Wen Qing cleared her throat. “Wei Wuxian – if the blood of one caster could send more than one person back, why would all four of you –” she broke off abruptly.

Shifting his head slightly, Sizhui looked at Wei Wuxian, revelling for a moment in the fact that he could, that he was *here* and *alive* and not bleeding onto Sizhui’s robes with empty eyes. Now, his eyes were full of horror, and fixed on Jiang Wanyin, but then he blinked, and turned his gaze to Wen Qing.

“It wouldn’t,” he said carefully. “Not in any version of the spell I could figure out, at least. I mean, it’s *possible* that my future self might’ve figured it out but if that was the case, I, I wouldn’t let...”

But Sizhui already knew, and the memory flashed violently in front of his eyes, his father hanging limp in a nameless guard’s arms, his head tilting so horribly, brokenly far back, his *throat* –

Sizhui sobbed, pressing his face into Jingyi's shoulder and gripping his hand tighter. "Hanguang Jun," he choked. "Su, Su, Su She, he – when they, he – he k-killed Hanguang Jun, he cut, he – he *cut* –"

With a small, choking gasp, Jingyi pulled him into a tight hug, and Sizhui clung to him, trying to calm his breathing, to keep his composure, to be a good Lan, but he couldn't. His breath was coming too fast, too ragged, and there were tears in his eyes and he was trembling so *badly*.

Jin Guangyao had used his father's lifeblood to come to the past.

This past, where his father was gone.

"I didn't, I didn't see," Jingyi whispered, his voice breaking. "I didn't know. I'm sorry, Sizhui."

"Breathe, Sizhui," Zizhen said gently, and then Sizhui heard a shuffling sound, and there was a hand on his back, rubbing it gently. "It's okay. Hanguang Jun's okay. We're all okay. I promise."

Sizhui gasped in a shuddering breath, shaking his head slightly. "I – I know, I'm okay, I'm okay!" It was a lie, and it tasted bitter on his tongue, but he knew he was acting like a child, he knew Lan Qiren would be ashamed of him, and he had to pull it together. He had to.

He pushed himself up, away from Jingyi, wiping quickly at his cheeks, and then he returned his eyes to his lap. He was fine. Just fine. He was fine.

"What..." Wen Ning whispered after a moment. "What do we do now?"

There was a sharp intake of breath, and then Wen Qing spoke, her voice crisp and clear. "What we do now is get you cleaned up. You're all covered in blood and god knows what else, and it'll be a miracle if none of you are in shock. A-Ning, go to the kitchen, see if you can rustle up enough lunch for everyone. We stocked up yesterday, there should be just about enough."

"Lunch?" Jingyi repeated hollowly. "We, we need to know what to do next, we-"

"Haven't eaten for at least twelve hours, probably longer," said Wen Qing. "And we need to process what you've told us. A half hour delay isn't going to kill anyone. Come on – all four of you. This way."

She stood up, leaving no room for argument, and almost automatically Sizhui stood too. He swayed on his feet, but Jingyi shot up and grabbed his elbow, and Zizhen and Jin Ling scrambled to their feet, too. Wen Qing led them back into the further part of the cave, where she'd taken Jingyi before. It was a smaller room, and separated from the main cavern by the curve of the wall, and an old curtain. There was a small barrel of water on the floor, and an old, cracked chest in one corner. On the opposite wall was a counter, and a set of homemade shelves, full of faded bottles and cheap clay pots. Herbs hung from the ceiling, and from the

labels on the pots, Sizhui guessed that this was where Wen Qing kept what medicine she could afford.

When they were all inside, Wen Qing turned to them. Her eyes lingered on Sizhui, and sadness flickered within them. Then she turned to the barrel, and shot a talisman into the water. At once, curls of gentle steam rose up from it, and she walked over to the chest, pulling out several pieces of old cloth.

“I was about to give A-Yuan a bath when A-Ning got back with Lan Yu. The water is clean, and so are these – they’re the closest thing we have to towels, I’m afraid. Do any of you have any spare robes?”

Sizhui nodded, fumbling for his Qiankun pouch, and he noticed Zizhen nod too. When Jingyi and Jin Ling shook their heads, Wen Qing gave a nod of her own, pulling out two sets of dark, worn robes from the same chest.

“They won’t be anything like what you’re used to, but they’re clean,” she said, passing them to the other two boys. “It won’t do you any good walking around in blood-soaked robes. Now, let’s get a good look at you.” She paused, straightening her back, and then she strode over to Sizhui, taking his wrist with one hand and pressing the back of her fingers to his forehead with the other. Sizhui froze, and a small smile crooked at the corner of her mouth. “You can breathe, Lan-gongzi... Or... A-Yuan.”

He obeyed, blinking back the tears that stung his eyes when she said his name and gazing at her.

He wondered what she was seeing, how much she believed. His hazy memories of the Burial Mounds included little of Wen Qing, but it was enough to know that he had loved her. Small smiles, gentle words, less gentle words aimed at Wei Wuxian. It was strange to see her face, clear and real, and unblurred by the muddled memory of a sick child.

He couldn’t keep the question behind his lips. “Do you believe us, Wen-guniang?”

Wen Qing stared at him, meeting his eyes with an intensity that made him feel very much like he was shrinking. Then, the corner of her mouth crooked into a small smile, and she shook her head slightly. “Against my better judgement.”

After a moment she began to frown, pushing her fingers almost painfully against his pulse point, and then she shook her head slightly.

Jin Ling blinked, unmoving, but he didn’t protest when Wen Qing took his wrist, listening to his pulse for a minute, before taking Zizhen’s. She hummed, a discontented sound.

“You’ve all got far too much spiritual energy,” she said warily. “Much more than is normal for a person at rest, even a powerful cultivator, and you’ve all flown far, and fast. Your energy should be depleted, not elevated.”

Sizhui considered that for a moment. He was utterly exhausted, but his golden core was humming and alive, and he swallowed.

“Are we going to – is it - qi deviation?” Jin Ling asked, his eyes bulging wide, and Sizhui shuddered.

Wen Qing smiled wryly. “Not while I am here, Jin-gongzi. Even if I wasn’t, none of you are in immediate danger of that, now. But we should monitor your qi over the next few days. It may well be left over from the array, if it was a particularly powerful spell, which I suppose it would have to be... I’ll talk to Wei Wuxian. In the meantime, I think you should get cleaned and changed, and then meditate for half an hour or so, until A-Ning’s prepared the food.”

“Meditate?” Jin Ling exclaimed. “But – but we need to figure out what we’re doing, we need to –”

Wen Qing raised an eyebrow, and Jin Ling fell silent. “Would Jin-gongzi prefer I used needles to put him down for a nap?”

Jin Ling’s cheeks burnt red, but his jaw jutted out slightly, and Sizhui braced himself.

“No, but if we’re going to sit around doing nothing, there’s something we need to do first – we need to talk to Wei Wuxian, in private.”

Dread dropped like a stone through Sizhui’s stomach. “Jin Ling-”

“It can’t wait,” Jin Ling insisted, though there was just as much worry as there was defiance in his eyes. “It’s important. Jiujiu made us swear, he said it was important to fixing things. We need to speak to Wei Wuxian, alone, now.”

Wen Qing narrowed her eyes, and Jin Ling held her stare, even as he shrank back a little. After a moment, she gave a single nod.

“Fine. But you will clean up and meditate afterwards, if you know what’s good for you.”

“Thank you,” said Jingyi quickly, before Jin Ling could speak. “We will.”

She nodded once more, striding out of the small back room with a sharp shout of, “Wei Wuxian!”

Sizhui closed his eyes. He remembered the look on Wei Wuxian’s face when Jin Guangyao had revealed the sacrifice of his golden core in the temple, and he didn’t want to see it again, but at the sound of Wei Wuxian’s footsteps his eyelids opened automatically. Already, Wei Wuxian looked uneasy, his face pale and tight, and his hand clenched into a fist. He smiled at them, but Sizhui couldn’t even pretend that it hid the strain in the man’s eyes.

“What is it?” he asked gently, and Jin Ling swallowed.

“Sizhui, can you do the shield thing?”

Hanging his head, Sizhui nodded, and cast the silence charm across the doorway. Wei Wuxian’s eyes widened.

“What is it?” he repeated, but now his voice was low, and urgent, and – and afraid. “What did I do?”

Jin Ling drew a deep breath, and raised his chin, but his voice was much softer than usual. “You need to tell Jiujiu that you gave him your golden core.”

At once, what little colour was still in Wei Wuxian’s face drained away, and his expression crumbled into horror. Sizhui closed his eyes, but he could still hear the man’s strangled gasp, and the desperate fear in his voice when he began to speak.

“What?” He rasped. “How – how did – when – what?”

“Wen Ning told Jiujiu at Lotus Pier,” said Jin Ling. “And Jin Guangyao figured it out at the Guanyin temple. When we asked how we make things better here, now, Jiujiu said you have to tell him, and you agreed. A little reluctantly, but you agreed.”

“No. No, no I – you won’t, you won’t tell him–” There was anger rising in Wei Wuxian’s voice, anger and fear and aggression, and Sizhui opened his eyes quickly, but Jin Ling just gave a sad smile, shaking his head slightly.

“You don’t want him to know,” he said, his lip trembling slightly. “I know. You don’t want him to be upset. But he deserves to know, and – and he needs to. Right now he doesn’t – he doesn’t understand why you won’t use your sword, why you turned to Demonic Cultivation and he’s scared. He’s scared because he’s on his own and you’ve left him and – and A-Niang left him – and everyone hates you and he doesn’t know what to do. You promised you would help him and you wouldn’t leave him, but you did leave, and he thinks – He needs to know why.” Jin Ling paused, turning on Jingyi, Zizhen, and Sizhui with a pointing finger and a voice more fierce than Sizhui had ever heard from him. “You will never, ever repeat this to any living soul – you will pretend you never heard it, it’s none of your business!”

Sizhui bowed his head. “Of course, Jin-gongzi.”

Looking a little mollified, Jin Ling turned back to Wei Wuxian. The man was trembling, his hand pressing into his chest, and tears clung to his eyelashes, and he looked so young. “I can’t...” he whispered, shaking his head. “I, I can’t.”

“You can,” Jin Ling replied, but then he paused, and let the insistence fall away from his face, leaving all his fear and worry there instead. “Otherwise I will have to do it, and it’s – it’s not my place, and he’ll be crushed, if it’s not you.”

“There has to be another—”

“There isn’t another way. Jiujiu said, *you* said, and we promised,” Jin Ling said, and Wei Wuxian stared at him as though Jin Ling was tearing out his heart.

“Please, Wei-qianbei,” begged Zizhen, though his voice was gentle. “You said yourself it was how we should start. Please.”

Wei Wuxian closed his eyes. “Fine.”

## Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed that chapter! Thank you for reading, and a huge thank you to everyone commenting, bookmarking, and leaving kudos, I really appreciate it and love hearing what you think!

## Chapter 9

### Chapter Notes

Thank you so much to everyone who's commented so far, I am thrilled that you're all enjoying the story!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Ever since the fall of Lotus Pier, Jiang Cheng had been sure he was drowning. He had never, ever expected to become a clan leader so young, and only in his worst nightmares had he imagined leading the Jiang without his siblings at his side. He'd hoped things would get easier after the war, but in a way they'd only got worse. A-Jie had left him for Zixuan, and Wei Wuxian had left him for the Wen, and Jiang Cheng was alone. Every single day he ached for them, the for the kindness and guidance of his sister, and the warmth and the strength of his brother, but they were gone.

It might have been easier if he could have turned to the elders for advice, but the only way to do that now was to kneel in the ancestral shrine and pray, because all his elders were dead. Of the disciples he did have, now, only a handful had been Yunmeng Jiang before Lotus Pier burnt. Though he was fond of all of them, and all the more so now, he had never been particularly close to any of them.

Everyone he had been close to had been in Lotus Pier when the Wen attacked.

Still, Jiang Cheng had kept going, stumbling alone through the duties of a clan leader and fumbling his way through inter-sect politics. He wasn't doing terribly, but he was sure he wasn't doing well either. He still didn't know how to stop every conference falling into a discussion about Wei Wuxian, and what should be 'done' about him. He still didn't know how to stop the world from hating his brother.

It still hurt.

But apparently, Jiang Cheng had been wrong. He hadn't been drowning. He couldn't have, not when drowning was so clearly, so obviously, this.

*"They say you killed him yourself."*

The words spun around and around in his head, and wrapped around his heart like a vine of thorns, and guilt and grief and fear flooded his lungs, heavy as water.

In this awful tale of the future, his siblings hadn't just left him. They had died, they had *died*, and left Jiang Cheng truly alone, and they'd left him with a baby to make sure he had to survive it, to stop him from following them and he – he –

He had killed his brother. Whether or not he'd struck with his sword, he'd killed his brother – he hadn't kept him safe, he'd let the clans rise up against him, he'd stood by while they pledged to kill him – directly or not, he had killed his brother.

He wanted to believe they were lying, that none of this was real, but he couldn't. Not after everything they had said, all the details they'd added – not when Lan Sizhui was the spitting image of Wen Yuan, and said 'Mn' in the exact same tone as Lan Wangji. Not when Jin Ling, *Jin Ling*, looked so much like his father and so much like Jiang Cheng himself. Not when the first thing Jiang Cheng had thought when he saw the boy on the back of Zixuan's sword was *I know you?*

The four boys were from the future.

And Jiang Cheng was drowning.

"A-Cheng," his sister breathed, taking his hands. "A-Cheng, are you-"

"Fine," he forced out, because Wei Wuxian and the time-travellers had disappeared into the back of the cave, but Wen Qing and Zixuan and Lan Wangji were still here, and to them he was Jiang-zongzhu. He had to be. "I'm fine."

He forced himself to breathe, to blink, to look at her – at A-Jie, alive and whole and beside him, with tear tracks staining her cheeks. She gave him a small smile, and Wen Qing cleared her throat.

"Hanguang Jun," she said, giving a short bow. "Before we do anything else, might I ask that you send word to your brother, regarding young Lan Yu? I fear if you don't, we may soon have an army of angry Lans at our door."

Jin Zixuan frowned. "How would anyone know that Lan Yu is here?"

Wen Qing looked sharply at him, a look that might be withering if it wasn't so tight with concern. "Jin-gongzi, a child disappeared from Cloud Recess this morning, a sword was stolen, and blood was left at the scene. It wasn't discovered before Hanguang Jun and Zewu Jun left for Jinlintai, but it will have been discovered now, and it is likely word was sent to the clan leader. Who is in Jinlintai. Where Jin Zixun is returning to. He may well already be there now, and if he hears of a missing Lan child, do you think he will hesitate for a *second* before claiming he saw the Ghost General carrying a Lan infant to the Burial Mounds, on the orders of Wei Wuxian?"

Jiang Cheng's stomach dropped. "Oh, shit."

"I will send a message," said Lan Wangji sombrely. "Also to Gusu."

"I'll send a message to Jinlintai, too," added Jin Zixuan, a little unexpectedly. "If we say that the boy was attacked, but that a junior disciple of the Lan clan managed to escape with him and ran into us on the way to Lanling, it isn't technically a lie. It wouldn't explain why Wen-gongzi took him, but it would cover at least some of the points, and if we give assurance he's



now under the protection of Lan-gongzi, Jiang-zongzhu and myself then with any luck we can prevent an all-out siege.”

Wen Qing blinked, and Jiang Cheng thought he saw surprise and relief flicker across her face, but then it smoothed out again, and he wondered if it had ever been there at all. If he had ever known her at all. The wooden comb burnt in his pocket. He looked away as Wen Qing bowed low.

Lan Wangji and Zixuan both left the cave, the latter still holding baby A-Ling in his arms. From the way his brother-in-law clutched at the baby, Jiang Cheng guessed it would be a while before anyone else got to hold him.

As they left, the curtain flapped, and Wei Wuxian emerged from the back room –

And Jiang Cheng’s heart dropped down to his stomach.

Already, his brother had looked wrong. He was too skinny, too wan, and during the junior’s tale he had grown paler and fidgeted less, and his lips had pressed into thinner and thinner a line. Now, he was deathly white, his eyes wide and tearful, and he was *trembling*, and for a moment Jiang Cheng thought a dog must have got into the cave, because that was the only reason he’d ever seen Wei Wuxian look so terrified. A heartbeat later, he realised he was wrong. There was no panic here, and the fear seemed different – less frantic, but deeper. Either way, it looked like his brother was about to break.

Yanli was on her feet even before Jiang Cheng was. “A-Xian, what’s wrong?”

“Ah, Shijie...” Wei Wuxian’s mouth curled into a smile, and his posture relaxed, but it was forced, and it made Jiang Cheng’s stomach curl angrily. If Wei Wuxian thought he was going to smile and pretend nothing was wrong this time, he had another think coming. “I’m fine. I just need to speak to Jiang Cheng. Wen Qing, Shijie, would you mind waiting outside?”

Jiang Cheng’s heart clenched at the thought of A-Jie leaving his sight, but to his surprise she spoke before he could.

“I would mind,” she said firmly. “A-Xian, what’s wrong?”

Wen Qing’s eyes flickered between Yanli, Wei Wuxian, and Jiang Cheng, and then she bowed her head. “I will keep anyone else from coming in,” she said, and then she disappeared out of the cave.

Wei Wuxian’s terrible mask of a smile flickered. “Shijie... please...”

But Yanli, who had never, ever denied Wei Wuxian anything in her life, stood firm, taking a step towards him. “A-Xian, I know we have failed you.” She continued speaking over Wei Wuxian’s spluttered protest. “I trusted that you had your reasons for coming here, for doing this, but – but I didn’t ask about the Wen, and you didn’t tell me. You told me there was a child here, but not that that child is yours, and not that that child, that baby, had suffered at the hands of the clan I married into. If I’d known... I don’t know what I might have done, A-

Xian, but it would have been something. Did you not hear what Lan Sizhui was saying? Failing to talk to each other, to listen to each other – A-Xian, it led to our deaths.”

Wei Wuxian’s splintering mask broke, and to Jiang Cheng’s horror his brother’s lip began to quiver as though he was about to start sobbing. Already, there were tears in his eyes, and it hurt, almost as much as A-Jie’s words did.

“Shijie...”

“A-Xian,” she replied, and he closed his eyes.

“Fine,” he whispered, and it sounded as though he was agreeing to his own death sentence. “Can... can we sit down?”

Yanli nodded, taking Wei Wuxian’s hand and drawing him towards the blanket. She took Jiang Cheng’s hand with her other, guiding them both to sit down in a small, tight triangle. With one knee touching Wei Wuxian’s, and the other Yanli’s, Jiang Cheng could almost pretend they were whole again.

“Now,” said Yanli, the slight tremor in her voice belying the calm. “What is it, A-Xian?”

Wei Wuxian glanced at Jiang Cheng, but then he closed his eyes again and hung his head, and fear twisted the thorns tighter around Jiang Cheng’s heart.

“Did I do something?” he asked, the words tumbling out tinted with anger, anger he knew his siblings would correctly read as fear. “Did they say I – Wei Wuxian, I wouldn’t, I would never-”

“I know, Jiang Cheng,” said Wei Wuxian softly, but he didn’t reach out, and he always reached out when Jiang Cheng was upset. The thorns dug deep into Jiang Cheng’s heart. “I know. It’s not... it’s something *I* did. Before. I don’t – I don’t regret it, and I never will. No matter what happens I would never, ever take it back, and I – it was the right decision. But you... you weren’t supposed to know. You were never supposed to know, either of you, but – but apparently one day you’ll find out... And apparently your Future Self made them promise to make me tell you.” He jerked his head towards the back of the cave and stared at Jiang Cheng. Then, Wei Wuxian let out a humourless laugh. It sounded more like a sob. “You weren’t ever supposed to know...”

“I wasn’t supposed to know what?” Jiang Cheng pushed. Still pierced by thorns, his heart was pounding as fast as it would during battle, as though it was trying to run away from whatever awful thing it was that Wei Wuxian didn’t regret. “Wei Wuxian, what is it?”

Wei Wuxian opened his mouth, and then closed it again. His eyes flickered between Jiang Cheng and Yanli, and then to the floor, and he shuddered, and his eyes closed. Then, he took a deep breath, and held out his wrist, moving Jiang Cheng’s hand so that his fingers rested on his brother’s pulse point. With a stab of fear, Jiang Cheng thought Wei Wuxian was trying to tell him that he too was dead, was some kind of fierce corpse like Wen Ning, but after a second he could feel Wei Wuxian’s pulse, thrumming fast – almost as fast as his own – and steady.

Confused, Jiang Cheng glanced at Wei Wuxian, and as if feeling his gaze, his brother met his eyes. He looked so tired, and a tear was rolling down his cheek –

And then Jiang Cheng realised what he wasn't feeling. He breathed in sharply, moving his fingers, trying to get a better grip, but from the way Wei Wuxian hung his head he knew he wouldn't find it. He knew what his brother had lost.

“When?” he rasped, and A-Jie looked between the two of them with growing fear. “Was it Wen Zhuliu?”

Yanli gasped, grabbing for Wei Wuxian's other wrist, and for a moment it looked like he was about to say yes – Jiang Cheng could see the word poised on his lips. But then Wei Wuxian closed his eyes, and shook his head.

“Then what happened?” Fury and fear and grief were tearing through Jiang Cheng in a tidal storm, the memory of the crushing anguish of losing his own golden core overwhelming him for a minute. Whoever had done that to his brother was going to pay. They were going to pay in blood. “Who did this to you?”

Eyes still closed, Wei Wuxian swallowed. “It was my choice,” he said quietly. Before Jiang Cheng could ask what the hell he was talking about, Wei Wuxian took his hand again, pressing against Jiang Cheng's own stomach. He held it there for a moment, and then he opened his eyes, letting Jiang Cheng see his pain, and his sorrow, and his stubborn resolution. “It was my choice. I don't regret it.”

“A-Xian,” Yanli whimpered, and Jiang Cheng felt as though he had plunged into a frozen lake. Lan Sizhui's words circled in his mind.

*“Xiao Xingchen had taken Song Lan to Baoshan Sanren, and begged her to take his eyes to give to Song Lan.”*

“No,” he whispered, shaking his head and pulling his hand away from his stomach, scrambling back from his brother. “No, no, no, no! You didn't, you couldn't, you – what did you do? What did you *do*, Wei Wuxian?”

Wei Wuxian raised his chin, but the effect was lessened by his still-shaking lip, and the tears on his cheeks. “You were... I needed to fix it. I found a way, and I made Wen Qing agree to do it. She didn't want to, but I begged her until she said yes. We told you it was Baoshan Sanren, but it... it was Wen Qing. She took out my golden core, and she put it into you. You needed it more than I did.”

Jiang Cheng thought this must be how it felt to be taken by a Waterborne Abyss. His head span and he felt like he was falling, sinking down faster than flight as water poured into his lungs, and he shook his head desperately.

“No, no! You – why? Why? Why would you—” he froze, remembering whispered words he'd pretended not to hear. “At the shrine you – you told my parents you'd taken care of us – is *that* what you meant? What, what A-Niang said in the boat, you – did you, you – did you do it because you thought that's what you *owed* her?”

A soft, wounded keen broke from Yanli's lips, and Wei Wuxian's eyes widened. "No—"

"Then why?" demanded Jiang Cheng. The ache of his throat let him know that he was shouting, screaming almost, but he couldn't help it, he couldn't stop. "Why? Why would you do that, why?"

Wei Wuxian's face softened, and his hand rose towards Jiang Cheng, but he flinched back. At once, Wei Wuxian's expression crumbled into anguish, but Jiang Cheng scrambled back further. He couldn't – he couldn't take anything else from Wei Wuxian he couldn't, he *couldn't* –

*Wen Chao was still laughing. Jiang Cheng was swaying, even now, even on his knees, and the hand of the nameless soldier twisted tighter in his hair, hauling him upright. Agony flashed across his chest at the movement, the deep, weeping wounds of the whip fierce enough to stand out among the barrage of aching and burning of the rest of him. It was difficult to breathe – his ribs were screaming, and what air he did manage suck down seemed thin and useless, but Jiang Cheng hadn't yelled, not aloud. Not once. His pride had won him that, had let him trap his cries behind his teeth.*

*When he'd wanted to scream, the image of Wei Wuxian flashed before his mind, taking lash after lash from the Zidian, refusing to make a sound, and it was enough to solder his teeth shut.*

*Because there was one mercy in this hell, one thing that meant Jiang Cheng's death wouldn't be worthless, and that was that Wei Wuxian was alive, and he wasn't here. Jiang Cheng knew full well that if the Wen had beaten his brother as they'd beaten him, Wei Wuxian would already be dead. It wasn't two days since he'd been struck with the Zidian, and he knew his mother hadn't held back.*

*It ached, that his mother hadn't held back. He'd seen it in her eyes, the desire to hurt his brother, to make him suffer, to make him pay a debt he didn't owe.*

*But Wei Wuxian wouldn't pay twice. He would live, and he would take care of A-Jie, and yes, he would mourn Jiang Cheng, but he would recover. He was so much stronger than Jiang Cheng. He always had been.*

*"Hey!" there was a loud slap as a hand smacked across Jiang Cheng's face, and then hot fingers seized his chin, twisting it until he was forced to stare straight into Wen Chao's awful face. "Don't float away from us yet, little Jiang," he said softly. "Not just yet. There's more to come – or, there may be. Maybe, we can stop now, and let you sleep. Maybe, we don't need to go further. Maybe. If you tell us where Wei Wuxian is."*

*"Why would you want him?" Jiang Cheng spat, pretending not to notice the taste of his own blood on his tongue. "You have me. You don't need him."*

*"He still owes me a hand," said Wen Chao, his smile growing, and Jiang Cheng scowled to try and hide how thoroughly the words terrified him. "His old masters are gone now – it's time for the dog to have a new owner."*

*Jiang Cheng spat in Wen Chao's face.*

*"You!" Wen Chao shrieked, and then his fist punched into Jiang Cheng's chest, and Jiang Cheng choked as he felt the searing, splintering pain of his bruised ribs breaking. Wen Chao struck him again, and then again until he was gasping for breath, and then at last the man stepped back, staring down at the blood on his knuckles. "Wen Zhuliu."*

*Wen Zhuliu stepped forward, and Jiang Cheng's heart froze.*

*"Do you know why they call Wen Zhuliu 'Core-Melting Hand?'" asked Wen Chao softly. Jiang Cheng didn't answer. He couldn't. He couldn't even breathe. "Of course you do. Your parents knew, even before he crushed their cores." No, no, no, no – "If you tell me where I might find Wei Ying, I will let you keep your golden core."*

*Horror tore through Jiang Cheng's chest like a raging bull, and he felt his breath come fast and ragged, betraying his fear to his enemy, but he couldn't help it – his core, his core –*

*Wen Chao stepped back, and Wen Zhuliu stepped forward, drawing his hand back.*

*"No," Jiang Cheng begged, despite his pride screaming at him to stop. "No, please, don't, don't, please–"*

*"Where is Wei Ying?"*

*"Please–"*

*"Where is Wei Ying?"*

*Jiang Cheng shook his head, trying to lean backwards, to scramble away, but the Wen soldier still had his hands in his hair, and there was nothing he could do to stop Wen Zhuliu coming closer, to stop him from kneeling on one knee before Jiang Cheng, and studying him with a terrifyingly impassive face.*

*"Please, don't, please, please," Jiang Cheng whispered, and Wen Zhuliu glanced over his shoulder at Wen Chao.*

*Wen Chao nodded.*

*Wen Zhuliu's hand plunged into Jiang Cheng's gut.*

*And the world exploded in white light and agony, and Jiang Cheng screamed. Distantly, he could still hear Wen Chao laughing, and then the pain grew worse, hotter, tighter, sharper, and he heard Wen Chao speak.*

*"Where is Wei Ying?"*

*Jiang Cheng shook his head, but then he felt Wen Zhuliu's hand twist inside him, felt his golden core writhe and burn and tear, and Jiang Cheng screamed, his every muscle shaking with the effort to hold onto his core as Wen Zhuliu pulled it away from him.*

*“Last chance,” said Wen Chao. “Then it’s gone forever. Where is Wei Wuxian?”*

*The pain was blinding, overwhelming, inescapable, and as hard as he was fighting he could feel his core slipping away, and he could taste blood in his mouth, and he gritted his teeth.*

*This would all stop, if he gave them his brother. If he let them do this to his brother.*

*“Fuck you!” he screamed, the words ripping painfully from his throat. “Fuck you!”*

*Then Wen Chao was laughing again. “Do it.”*

*And then Wen Zhuliu achieved the impossible, and made the pain a thousand times worse than the hell-worthy agony it already was, and –*

“Jiang Cheng,” Wei Wuxian begged, and there was terror in his voice. “Jiang Cheng, come back to us, please!”

*No, no, Wei Wuxian couldn’t be there –*

“A-Cheng,” Yanli sobbed, squeezing his hand, and he jumped, realising with a start that he must have got lost in the memory, and the image of a blood-soaked Lotus Pier fell away, and the Demon Subdue Palace took its place.

Feeling as empty and hollow as he had when he woke up in Yiling without his core, Jiang Cheng looked slowly up at his brother.

His brother, who he had lost his golden core to protect.

His brother, who had lost his golden core anyway.

“It was all for nothing...” he breathed, barely aware of the words before they left his lips. “Nothing...”

“What are you talking about?” Wei Wuxian asked desperately, leaning towards him without reaching out. “What do you mean it was nothing? Jiang Cheng?”

Jiang Cheng looked at his brother, at the confusion that twisted the fear and pain on his face, and rage and despair rose hot in his heart, and before he could help it he was yelling, his words breaking out between sobs he couldn’t stop. “I mean it was for nothing! Every blow Wen Chao struck, every – every second of – I was only there so you weren’t!”

With a hollow choke, Wei Wuxian jerked back as though he’d been stabbed. “*What?*” Beside him, Yanli was sobbing quietly, clinging to Jiang Cheng’s hand with trembling fingers.

The familiar sucker-punch of failure struck Jiang Cheng in the gut. Even when he was trying to protect them, all he could do was hurt his siblings.

*This is why they leave you,* sneered a voice in the back of his mind, one that sounded uncomfortably like his mother’s. His heart hurt at the thought of her. Wouldn’t she think this a victory – Wei Wuxian stripped of his golden core, his giving it to Jiang Cheng.

Or perhaps not. Perhaps she'd still be disappointed in Jiang Cheng for failing to re-create his own. Perhaps she'd be bitterly satisfied about being proven correct that he was nothing without Wei Wuxian.

Somehow, the thought of his mother drained his anger away. It might have been because he was really angry at her, but he still mourned too deeply to let himself feel rage so hot towards her. It might have been because he was just exhausted. Zixun's ambush, the time-travellers' story, the revelation of Wei Wuxian's sacrifice – it was too much. He felt like he was shrinking, that he was small and helpless as a child again – a feeling that didn't go away when Wei Wuxian tumbled forward with a strangled cry, grabbing his shoulders and shaking him.

"Jiang Cheng, what do you *mean*?" he begged. "What are you talking about?"

"Nothing," Jiang Cheng whispered, but Wei Wuxian's fingers grew painfully tight around his shoulders, and his voice was raw with an agony that tore at Jiang Cheng's soul.

"Jiang Cheng, what did you *do*?"

Jiang Cheng forced himself to meet his brother's eyes. "You... you were getting pancakes," he whispered, and for a moment Wei Wuxian looked more confused than ever. "You'd got medicine for A-Jie and you, you were getting pancakes."

Understanding dawned in Wei Wuxian's eyes, and his fingers grew even tighter. "The day after...?"

A-Jie choked, grabbing Jiang Cheng's arm desperately, and he knew that she understood. Jiang Cheng swallowed, and nodded, looking back at his brother. "The Wen had seen you," he muttered. "They were drawing their swords, and all I could do was yell, and let them see me. So I did. I just – I just wanted to protect you, but... but I failed. Just like I fail at everything."

"Oh, A-Cheng," A-Jie sobbed, shifting up onto her knees to pull him into a tight hug, resting her chin on his head. "A-Cheng..."

Wei Wuxian was frozen, his hands still on Jiang Cheng's shoulders, pinned there by A-Jie's arms, and his face was contorted with horror and confusion. "Jiang Cheng," he rasped. "Jiang Cheng, they nearly killed you."

"I thought they would," he admitted, hating how small his voice sounded, and how desperately Yanli cried out as she clutched him closer. "But it was better than them killing you."

Wei Wuxian's face twisted into a look so bewildered it would be comical, if his eyes weren't so tight with pain. "Wh – in what world would that be *better*, Jiang Cheng? You're the clan leader, I'm just –"

"My da-ge," Jiang Cheng mumbled, and though the words sounded strange they also sounded *right*, and Wei Wuxian choked. "You're not my shixiong, Wei Wuxian, you're – you're my

da-ge, and I – after – I couldn't lose you, too. I couldn't. But you lost your core anyway... you, you went through that anyway, because of me..."

Wei Wuxian's eyes widened, and then he froze, completely unmoving but for the tears streaming down his cheeks. It didn't look like he was even breathing. Jiang Cheng closed his eyes and shuddered, letting himself sink back into A-Jie's embrace, letting her hold him like he was a child again, like he wasn't Jiang-zongzhu, like he wasn't failing at every turn.

Like he wasn't so much of a failure that addressing his own brother as 'da-ge' was enough to stun him into silence.

Yanli's arms tightened, and she let out another sob. "You two – you two..." Then, to Jiang Cheng's shock, she let out a yell – small and short but *angry*, and louder than any sound he'd heard from his sister in years – and she pushed him away. Her hand stayed clenched around his arm, but her other hand shot out and grabbed Wei Wuxian, twisting tightly around his wrist. "You – you – you're both *idiots!*" she cried, shaking them with more force than he realised she possessed. She was trembling herself, and her words came out as angry stutters, as though she was too mad to properly form what she wanted to say. "You – you never *talk*, you never talk to each other and – and if you – if you both just *listened* for *once* then we wouldn't be here! If you just – two isn't enough! I can't have *one* of you, I can't – I – I need you both and I need you to stop throwing your lives away like they're nothing because you're *brothers* and you *love* each other and if you don't start *talking* I swear I'll, I'll –"

"Shijie," Wei Wuxian whispered brokenly, reaching to wipe the tears from her face, but she shook her head fiercely.

"I mean it, A-Xian," she sobbed. "I mean it – you – I can't lose *either* of you, and you can't lose each other. You can't. I can't believe – A-Xian, you should have told me. You should have told A-Cheng, it, it wasn't fair to do that without asking, to just – to just – you're not spare parts, A-Xian, you're not – that's not what your place is in this family. You are our *brother*. You should have told us, you should've – and *you*," her hand tightened around Jiang Cheng's arm. "You should've told A-Xian that years ago. He deserves to know how much you love him, A-Cheng, I – I can't always be the one to tell him. That goes for you two, A-Xian, you – you need to be honest with each other." Jiang Cheng's eyes flickered to Wei Wuxian, and found him staring back at Jiang Cheng. He was pale and shaking, and he was still crying, and Jiang Cheng couldn't stand it, but he knew that he looked the same. A-Jie shook them both fiercely. "Do you hear me?"

"Yes, A-Jie," mumbled Jiang Cheng, in the same moment that Wei Wuxian nodded, and said, "We hear you, Shijie."

"Good!" She softened her grip slightly and sat back, looking at them expectantly.

"I'm sorry, Jiang Cheng," Wei Wuxian whispered. "I'm sorry that you feel like what you did was pointless. Please don't think that. I don't regret it, and I don't want you to, either. Please." He paused, and swallowed, slowly meeting Jiang Cheng's eye. "I didn't do it because I thought I should, or, or because it was my duty. I did it because you – you couldn't be happy without one, and I – I couldn't be happy unless you were. Because, because you're my – you're my family, Jiang Cheng, and I love you."



The words struck somewhere deep and raw in Jiang Cheng's heart. If Wei Wuxian was telling the truth, if he really loved Jiang Cheng that much – then surely, surely, he still loved him that much now? But he'd left, he'd still left Jiang Cheng alone – did he resent it, being in Lotus Pier without his core, did he resent Jiang Cheng for having it?

But no – he seemed too upset at Jiang Cheng's pain for that. Slowly, things fell into place in Jiang Cheng's mind. Wei Wuxian's reluctance to carry his sword, his turning to demonic cultivation – his desperation to protect Wen Qing, and Wen Ning. His drinking, the emptiness of his eyes, the way he distanced himself from Jiang Cheng. If he had no core, it all made sense.

He wanted to believe what Wei Wuxian was saying, and he knew that it made sense, but there was something very deliberately left out of that sentence, and he took a deep, shuddering breath, looking down at his hands – but then he saw the Zidian, and remembered it smashing across his brother's back, and he had to hide his flinch. He swallowed, and steeled himself.

"Family..." he said, forcing down the urge to cover his fear with anger. "Not... not your didi?"

Wei Wuxian's eyes widened, and he shook his head slightly, his gaze flickering to A-Jie, and then back to Jiang Cheng. "You – you never wanted to be..."

*No, A-Niang never wanted me to be*, he thought, but aloud he just whispered, "Yes I did. Yes I do. I love you."

Wei Wuxian seemed to shrink before him, fresh tears welling in his eyes, but he also smiled, small and trembling but genuine, and A-Jie tugged on both of their arms, pulling them towards each other. Automatically, Wei Wuxian's arms opened, and Jiang Cheng tumbled into them, clinging to his brother tightly. Wei Wuxian's arms closed around him, hugging him close, and Jiang Cheng pressed his face into his brother's shoulder.

And because A-Jie was there, and wanted them to be honest, and would expect more from Jiang Cheng, he let the words that had weighed down his heart for the last eighteen months come out at last.

"I want you to come home," he mumbled. "Please come home."

Wei Wuxian's breath hitched, and he pulled Jiang Cheng closer, pressing his face against Jiang Cheng's hair. "I want to," he whispered. "More than anything, I want to come home. But if I leave, everyone here will be killed, Jiang Cheng. I can't let that happen."

"We will figure something out," said A-Jie firmly, though she was still sniffing. "Together, we can fix this. Together."

Jiang Cheng felt Wei Wuxian nod, heard him say "Shijie..." in a pleading whimper, and then there was a warmth on his back as A-Jie joined the hug, sandwiching Jiang Cheng between his siblings. One of Wei Wuxian's arms left him to wrap around A-Jie, but the other stayed tight around Jiang Cheng, and A-Jie kissed the back of his hair.

And for the first time since Lotus Pier fell, Jiang Cheng felt that someone had finally thrown him a lifeline.

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading, I hope you enjoyed it!

# Chapter 10

## Chapter Notes

I am honestly blown away by all the lovely comments you guys have been leaving, thank you so much! I hope you enjoy this chapter - we've finally got some Lan Zhan POV!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Somehow, the Burial Mounds felt darker than they did the last time he was there. Lan Wangji knew they shouldn't – the last time he had visited Wei Ying resentful energy had escaped the blood pool and filled the air, and even when it was dispelled the clouds had hung low and heavy in the sky. Today, it was a little brighter – there was still no sign of the sun, and ashen grey cloud still covered the sky, but the resentful energy that coiled around Wei Ying's careful wards was not as thick.

Perhaps it was simply his dread that made the world feel darker. It was heavy as stone in Wangji's heart, and biting cold, and with every word that the four young strangers had said it had grown heavier, and colder. At first, there had been an element of suspicion at its centre – these people said they were from the future, which was impossible, but Wei Ying seemed to believe them. If he had been deceived into thinking this imposter who wore the clothes of Gusu Lan was his little A-Yuan, it would be difficult for Wangji to reach him.

But slowly, as the story unfolded, Wangji's suspicion had given way to belief, and horror had taken its place. It couldn't happen, this future they spoke of. It couldn't. The slaughter of the Wens of the Burial Mounds, the death of Wei Ying –

The death of Wei Ying.

Wangji's heart was still stuck on it, still struggling to figure out how to beat against such a grief, and had been even while Wei Ying sat beside him, breathing and alive and whole. The idea that in just a few days Wei Ying could be taken from him, could be damned and maligned by the entire world and *taken* from him – the thought that Wangji would have to exist in a world *without* Wei Ying –

Nothing had ever hurt like this.

Nothing had ever scared him like this.

And still, it was not the only thing to fear. This older version of Jin Guangyao was a threat, and a deadly one, a man who had killed his father and his brother and possibly even his son, a man who had used kidnapped children to lure their parents to their doom.

A man who was obsessed with Wangji's xiongzhang, a man willing to take Xichen's memories from him to keep him by his side. If *that* Jin Guangyao found a Lan Xichen who was still oblivious to his manipulation and his malice, he might try to snatch Wangji's brother away before he could learn the truth. It did not seem likely that he would kill Xichen, but that was little comfort. As it was, the Jin Guangyao that Wangji knew was a threat all of his own, and he was often alone with Xichen.

Wangji wasn't used to his brother being vulnerable, and he did not like it at all. He wished that his xiongzhang was beside him with an urgency he hadn't felt since Xichen's disappearance after the burning of Gusu, though he quickly shook away the thought. Dwelling on those memories was not going to make any of this easier.

And then there was yet another thing to worry about. It was almost as strong as his fear for his brother, but this fear was different – it was not raw and frantic, but instead formed of worry and guilt coiled together, festering into dread. It was strange, to feel guilty for something he had not yet done, but he could not help it. The feeling burnt within him, every time he looked at Lan Sizhui.

Because there was something that the boy had not said - something he spoke around subtly and carefully - so subtly Wangji doubted the others had noticed.

Lan Sizhui said that Hanguang Jun had inducted him into the Lan Clan.

True as that may be, Wangji knew it wasn't the whole truth. It couldn't be.

For one thing, the ribbon the boy wore was stitched with the cloud motif, and not plain white, marking him as one of the Lan bloodline. If he had simply been accepted into the clan as a disciple, his ribbon would be plain. Secondly, he had seemed significantly distressed at the mention of Wangji being stabbed – it had hurt a little to see the boy hide his face in his friend's shoulder, to see the way he trembled.

Thirdly, Lan Wangji knew his own mind. He knew that if things happened as Lan Sizhui had said, and he found A-Yuan alone in the Burial Mounds, he would not just take him back to Gusu. He knew that the righteous thing to do was to save the boy – and that the kind thing to do would have been to find a family to take him in.

The *selfish* thing to do would be keep A-Yuan himself, to hold close the very last part of Wei Ying had he could reach, to raise the child himself, with no real idea as to how to do so. To his shame, he knew the path that he would take.

And finally, even beyond that, there was something else, something less tangible than what he could see, or what he knew of himself. It was something he would not call evidence, not on its own, but it was undeniable all the same. In the moment he first saw Lan Sizhui at Jinlintai, something deep in Wangji's chest had stirred, a feeling almost like recognition – it had made no sense, and had been quickly overwhelmed by the pain of seeing Wei Ying with his arms so tightly wrapped around another man, and then by the fury that came with realising he did not *know* Lan Sizhui, that a stranger was impersonating a member of his sect, his *family* –

In any case. That feeling, the ribbon, the story the juniors told – it all pointed to a single conclusion – Lan Wangji had not just taken Wen Yuan into the Lan clan – he had adopted him.

And the only reason he could think of for Sizhui to keep that quiet about that was that Hanguang Jun had been a terrible father.

Even forming the thought made the guilt roil in his gut. He had never expected to be a father, but he had always been certain that did it happen, he would do better than Qingheng Jun. His child would see him, would know he cared, would *never* know him by his title.

But Lan Sizhui called him Hanguang Jun.

Of course, there was a chance that his guess was wrong, and that he had never adopted A-Yuan, but that seemed less likely. Either way, he would need to know before they discussed what to do next. It was improbable that they would decide to make it widely known that the four juniors had travelled through time, and if it was necessary to give them new identities it would be best to know who they already thought themselves to be. Besides, if Wangji had made mistakes in Sizhui's past, he needed to know what they were. He needed to fix them.

Eventually, Wen Ning made a stammering announcement that food had been prepared, and Wen Qing declared that everyone could return to the cave. Jin Zixuan hurried back inside, the baby now fussing in his arms, and Wangji followed. Wei Ying was sitting beside Jiang Wanyin, so close that their legs were pressed together in a manner that looked like it must be uncomfortable. Jiang Yanli was on her feet, taking her child from her husband and murmuring quietly to him. The eyes of all three siblings were red and swollen, and their cheeks rubbed red in an effort to chase away tearstains, and Wangji looked away.

The curtain at the back of the cave flapped open, and the juniors emerged. Lan Jingyi was rubbing his eyes as though he had been napping, though the others looked more alert. Sizhui gravitated straight to Wei Ying's side, and Wei Ying smiled at him as he sat down, tucking the boy beneath his arm and hugging him close.

In that moment, Wangji wanted to flee, but for all his flaws, he had never been one to avoid his mistakes, or try to dodge their consequences. So he steeled himself, and spoke.

"I wish to talk to Lan Sizhui. Alone."

To his dismay, the boy stiffened, his eyes widening, and Wei Wuxian gave a light frown.

"Ah, Lan Zhan," he said. "Can't it wait until he's eaten something? You've already glared him half to death today."

Wangji frowned. He had not intended to glare anyone to death – but then he supposed his jealousy must have shown on his face when he had seen the love Wei Ying showed Lan Sizhui, and interpreted wrongly. "It can wait," he said slowly. "But not long. After we eat. Before we talk."

Sizhui swallowed, and then nodded hesitantly. The guilt burnt fiercer. Clearly, if the boy was this afraid of him, Wangji had been a *terrible* father.

Wen Ning provided Wangji with a bowl of food of his own, and though his gut was twisted with emotion, Lan Wangji ate. Some of the others spoke quietly amongst themselves, though neither Sizhui nor Jingyi spoke while they were eating, and as such they finished before most of the others. As did Wangji. It was a little rude to leave the hall before the others were finished, but they were short on time so Wangji stood, and after glancing at Jingyi, so did Sizhui.

“We won’t be long,” said Wangji, hoping to ease some of the concern from Sizhui’s face, but instead all he achieved was making Wen Qing glare at him, her eyes narrowing. This boy was her cousin, he supposed. It was only natural.

They left the cave, and Wangji walked a little way from down the path, just far enough to be out of earshot of the Wen’s little houses. Sizhui followed him wordlessly. When he turned to look at the boy, Wangji found that his head was down, and his hands clenched tightly before him.

“You do not need to worry,” he said awkwardly, and Sizhui glanced up at him. In a rare occurrence, Lan Wangji wished he was better with words. “I just have questions.”

“I understand,” said Sizhui with a little nod, and then he waited, watching Wangji with soulful eyes.

Whatever this boy had seen in his life, it was more than anyone should have witnessed at the age of nineteen.

Inexplicably, there was a lump in Wangji’s throat, but he forced it down. “In your past. Did I adopt you? As... mine?”

Surprise flickered across Sizhui’s eyes, but then his expression crumpled slightly, and Wangji’s heart *ached*. The boy closed his eyes, and turned his face toward the ground, and nodded.

The guilt in Wangji’s gut churned more fiercely than ever, and he felt a little sick. It took him a moment to summon up the courage to speak again.

“I was a bad father.” He didn’t let it be a question – if it was a question, Sizhui might feel that he should skirt around it, that he should not answer fully – this way, he needed only to confirm it.

But Sizhui’s eyes opened, widening in what looked like horror, and he shook his head quickly. The words that spilled from his mouth were almost frantic. “No – never! Not even – never, never!”

Wangji felt himself frown, saw the boy’s eyes searching his face. “You did not say. In the cave. If I was not a bad father, why was it not worth saying?”

Sizhui's lower lip trembled, and he stared down at the ground again, and a surge of protective instinct rose in Lan Wangji so strongly it hurt. "I – I'm sorry, Hanguang Jun. I didn't want you to feel obligated to... well, anything. You've never adopted me, it, it never happened, now, and it wouldn't be right to... to expect anything, of you. I knew... I knew that if you knew, you'd think that you should, but that, that isn't fair."

Wangji's frown deepened. Frankly, he was not entirely sure what 'fair' was in such a situation, but he was not in a philosophical mood at all, so he put aside the concept of fair for a while, and addressed the other thing that grated on him, if he was not, in fact, a terrible father.

"You call me Hanguang Jun. Why?"

Sizhui blinked as though this was a surprising question, before shaking his head slightly, and apparently remembering where – or more aptly when – he was. His cheeks grew a little pink. "I... The elders didn't like it, if I called you Baba in public. They said I was a ward, and nothing more, and that it was enough that they let you keep me." Wangji's fury must have shown on his face, because Sizhui gave a weak smile, and spoke very quickly. "Not to me, they, they didn't say it to my face. But I heard it, and I – I knew it made things easier for you, so..."

Apprehension tightened his throat. "They said they 'let' me keep you?" There was no rule against taking a ward or adopting a child into the Lan clan – it was not something the elders should have any stand to deny. Unless the prospective parent was one who had broken the strictest of rules. *Oh*. "What did I do?"

Sizhui swallowed, looking almost like he wanted to wince. "I don't know," he said uncertainly. "No one ever told me exactly what happened. But I think... from what Zewu Jun did tell me, and what I've heard... I think you defended Wei-qianbei, at Nightless City."

Wangji nodded slowly. That did not seem improbable. "What was the punishment?"

A tear trailed down Sizhui's cheek. "You... you were whipped," he said hesitantly. "And... and confined to the back hill, for, for three years..."

A chill ran down Wangji's back, and he hid his shudder with practised ease. "Three years."

Sizhui nodded, and suddenly Lan Wangji felt very cold. If he had been in enforced seclusion, then –

"Where were you?"

"I think I stayed with Zewu Jun, but I can't really remember," admitted Sizhui. "But I saw you every day. Zewu Jun made sure of it."

Lan Wangji took a moment to consider this. On one hand, it was a relief to hear that he might have had the courage to stand against the clans to protect Wei Ying, but on the other, he had failed. He could fail again. It was unpleasant to think that he had been whipped – the discipline whip was a mark of shame, one Wangji had never expected he would bear, but it

was little compared to the thought that for three years, Sizhui's childhood had been anything like his own. For a moment, he was overcome with the memory of kneeling outside an empty house, and with bitter relief that Sizhui had not had to do the same.

He took a deep breath. "I was a father to you. And not... not a bad one."

A small smile tugged at Sizhui's lip as he wiped his eyes. "You were the best," he mumbled, and Wangji blinked. Surely that was an overstatement. But when he saw Wangji's face, Sizhui's smile grew a little stronger, and he nodded. "The best. Even when I was little, and you – you couldn't do much for me, you were always there. Always."

Suddenly, Lan Wangji felt very warm. It was like a tiny hearth fire was burning in his stomach, and it was not at all uncomfortable. When he looked at the boy, he felt very fond, and fiercely protective, and strangely (frankly alarmingly) certain in these thoughts. The corner of his lip tugged up slightly. "If it is decided it is safer to keep your identities secret, the world cannot know I am your father. If you are nineteen, there are less than three years between us. It would not be credible."

Sizhui's breath caught in his throat and he froze, his eyes somehow growing even wider. For a moment, Wangji thought he had said something wrong, but before he could panic, Sizhui whispered, "That you are?"

Wangji nodded carefully. "I don't share the memories you do – I do not *know* you as I did in your lifetime. You are not much younger than me – it will be different. But I raised you. So I am your father. Assuming you still wish for me to be."

Sizhui nodded, so quickly his hair fell around his face and clung to the tear tracks on his cheeks. "If – if you don't, if you don't mind –"

"I do not mind," said Wangji firmly.

Sizhui's hand flew up to cover his mouth, but it didn't completely muffle the sob that broke out, and the boy winced, his face going red as he tried to keep from crying. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," he choked, and Wangji stepped forward. The sight of Sizhui crying was very distressing, and almost painful, and he was not sure what to do about it, but he knew that he wanted it to stop, and right now.

Not that he thought saying so aloud would be any help. Wangji was not good with people, but he was not *that* bad.

"You are upset?" he hazarded, and Sizhui shook his head, his arm wrapping tightly around his stomach.

"No, no, I'm not, I – I don't know what's wrong. Hanguang Jun, I don't know what's wrong," he begged, sobs and gasps breaking from his lips, and panic flared in Wangji's mind, his thoughts flailing madly within him. If this was leftover from the spell he did not know how to fix it, if it was a curse, or an illness, or a wound he was useless – he should go and get Wen Qing immediately – but he would need to know what to tell her. He cast his mind back over



everything they had been told, everything Sizhui had been through, and then he looked at the way the boy's arms were pressed so tightly against himself, and then he thought, *Oh*.

Carefully, Wangji stepped a little closer, steeling himself for the discomfort that always came with touching people he was not close to. It did not come. Not when he put a hand on Sizhui's shoulder, and not when he gently pulled the boy closer. It didn't come when Sizhui collapsed against him with a sob, when his arms wrapped around Lan Wangji and clung to him with a strength that forced the air from his lungs. It didn't come when Wangji's own arms moved without instruction, folding around Sizhui and hugging him closer, or even when he felt Sizhui's tears soak through his robes to his chest.

"You – you –" Sizhui sobbed, but then he broke off and clung tighter.

"I what?" said Wangji softly, doing the best he could to make his voice gentle. It must have worked, because Sizhui gave a little wail, and then all the words came tumbling out.

"You were dead, you, he stabbed you and you were dying and you didn't, you didn't move and you were just – and then they, they took you outside and, and Su She, he, he killed you, he stabbed you and then he *killed* you and I – I thought I – you were gone, Baba, you were gone!"

"I am not gone," he promised. "I am – not... the same. But I'm not gone. Not dead."

Sizhui nodded into his robes. "I know, I know, I - I'm sorry-"

"Do not be sorry," said Wangji firmly. "No need."

"It's forbidden," Sizhui whimpered, "to be overly sad."

"Yes," said Wangji. "But this is not 'overly.' You have suffered. You are healing. No rules have been broken."

Sizhui drew in a shuddering breath, but at least he didn't sob again. Only a little hesitantly, Wangji rubbed his back, the way Xiongzhang would rub his when they were little, and he was chasing the nightmares away. Sizhui melted into him, the tension seeping out of his body, and Wangji smiled slightly to himself.

Maybe he truly hadn't been a terrible father after all.

When Sizhui's breathing was calm again, Wangji pulled away slightly, holding the boy at arm's length. Sizhui wiped his cheeks quickly. His headband was crooked. Carefully, very carefully, Wangji reached down, straightening it gently, and Sizhui beamed, his eyes filling with tears.

*My son*, Wangji thought, running his fingers over the ribbon.

Perhaps it should feel stranger than it did, given Sizhui's age, but with so much else to worry about, Lan Wangji didn't think there was much point dwelling on the strangeness of things. His teenage son being here now was infinitely better than the future that had been described. And already Wangji looked at the boy before him, and his heart said *mine*.

“Thank you, Hanguang Jun,” murmured Sizhui, wiping his cheeks again.

“Mn,” Wangji said, trying not to frown. Sizhui was still smiling, and he didn’t want that to disappear, but he didn’t think he liked being called Hanguang Jun by his son. Still, the alternative Sizhui was used to was apparently ‘Baba,’ and that would cause far too many questions if it was heard in the wrong company. He would have to think about it.

There was so much to think about. To discuss. Wangji knew they should go back inside, that the sooner they solved this tangled mess of a web the sooner Sizhui and Wei Ying and the Wens would be safe.

Sizhui took a deep breath, straightening his shoulders, but then his smile grew a little shy. “I... I still have it, you know,” he said meekly, digging into his sleeve and pulling out a small, blue rabbit. It was faded and worn, but it was of the highest quality Gusu had to offer, and Lan Wangji recognised it at once. After all, he had commissioned it less than a month ago. A small smile tugged at his cheek as he took it, running his thumb over the familiar embroidery.

“You carry it with you,” he said, a little surprised.

“Mn.” Sizhui nodded, glancing down with a tiny smile. “You... you snuck him into my bag before my first night hunt. It became a kind of tradition.”

Lan Wangji stared at the little toy, warmth growing around his heart.

“You were always the best father,” Sizhui murmured, so quietly Lan Wangji almost missed it.

A lump rose in his throat, and he looked at Sizhui, passing the rabbit back. “I will try not to fail you now, then.”

“You won’t,” Sizhui promised, and Wangji could not help but smile slightly.

“I am grateful for your confidence,” he said, and then he paused. “Before we return, I am sorry. For... glaring you to death.”

Smiling a little, Sizhui nodded, his face honest and open. “It’s okay, I understand. You didn’t know who I was, and I know how much you care about Wei-qianbei.”

Wangji froze.

Oh.

Oh no.

This was –

How did –

Oh no.

This was not a problem Lan Wangji had anticipated.

No one knew, no one – except Xiongzhong, because he knew Wangji better than Wangji knew himself, and Wei Ying – but Wei Ying’s silence in the cave of the Xuanwu had told Wangji all he needed to know in regards to the other man’s feelings. He had resigned himself long ago to a role only as Wei Ying’s friend, his confidant. If he could be in Wei Ying’s life, and know that Wei Ying was happy, that would be enough.

But if other people *knew* –

He did not know how he would cope with that. He did not know if he could – Wei Ying wouldn’t be able to ignore it anymore, wouldn’t be able to pretend that the confession in the cave had never happened. If things changed, if Wangji lost the friendship they now had –

“Hanguang Jun?” Sizhui asked anxiously. “Hanguang Jun, are, are you alright?”

Wangji realised he hadn’t been breathing. He forced himself to, and blinked at Sizhui, who was staring at him with concern.

“What’s wrong?”

*Maybe he doesn’t actually know*, Wangji thought, almost hysterically. *Maybe he just meant ‘care’ as one would care for a friend, maybe he meant –*

“Oh! Are you and Wei-qianbei not together yet?”

If Wangji were a less disciplined man, he might have shrieked. He felt his face burning, his heart racing, and a long-buried hope threatened to fly again in his heart. “Not... together... yet?” He repeated, struggling on every word, and Sizhui blushed.

“I’m sorry,” he said quickly. “I just – at Dafan Mountain you were both – I just assumed by now you two were already ... you know...”

“I do not know,” Wangji said, his voice rasping painfully in his throat. Had breathing always been this difficult?

Sizhui was growing redder and redder. “Well, courting,” he said, and Wangji’s thoughts seemed to fly straight out of his head, leaving it empty and weightless, and he thought this must be how one felt before fainting. With great effort, he dragged his thoughts together enough to form a sentence.

“We are not.”

*We were then?*

If they were courting in the future, then maybe Wei Ying felt –

*Or, a voice in the back of his mind said coldly, you were all he had after he returned from the dead, and he felt bound by his debt to pity you, and tell you what you wanted to hear.*

“Oh...” said Sizhui awkwardly. “We won’t say anything, I promise.”

Wangji's face burnt even hotter. He had no doubt that his ears were crimson by now – the blush might even be leaking onto his face. The other time-travellers knew – Lan Jingyi and Jin Ling and Ouyang Zizhen all *knew* –

Wangji wanted to drown himself in the Cold Caves.

But now was not the time to be worrying about that, so he forced himself to say, “Mn,” and held out a hand, gesturing to Sizhui they should return to the cave. Without another word, the boy nodded, and they returned to the others. Wei Ying stared at them as they walked back in, and Wangji prayed that his ears weren't as red as they felt. He couldn't meet the other man's eyes, not while his head was still spinning so badly, and his every instinct was to sit as far from Wei Ying as possible – but earlier he had sat at his side. People might notice if he didn't do so again – or would they?

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Wei Ying look at Sizhui – and he saw Wei Ying's eyes narrow.

“Lan Zhan! He's been crying, what did you do?”

“Nothing!” Sizhui said quickly, smiling a little shyly. “It's okay, Wei-qianbei. I'm okay.”

Wangji nodded, forcing himself to look straight at Wei Ying. “It was clarified that I raised Lan Sizhui as my son. That I am his father. There were... emotions.”

There was a beat, and then Wei Ying laughed. Jiang Yanli put a hand on his arm and gave him a reproachful look – or what Wangji assumed counted as a reproachful look as far as she was concerned. The expression was mild, but Wei Ying flinched as though she was glaring, his own smile turning sheepish.

Still, he was not sheepish enough to repeat Wangji's words, and make his ears burn hotter with embarrassment. “‘There were emotions?’ Ah, Lan Zhan, it's good to know some things never change, no matter how crazy the world is. You're still terrible at talking.”

Beside him, Jiang Wanyin snorted. “Like you're one to talk,” he muttered, in a tone Wangji couldn't quite read. It was almost empty, almost bitter, but an echo of fondness hung behind it. For a moment, pain flickered across Wei Ying's face, but he smoothed it away with a sad smile and bumped his knee against Jiang Wanyin's.

“Do you need more time?” asked Jiang Yanli kindly. “If not we're ready to begin – A-Ling has been fed, so he should sleep a while now, but I'm sure we can make ourselves useful for a while if you'd like to continue talking.”

“We can begin,” said Wangji. “It should not be delayed further.”

Sizhui nodded, and Wei Wuxian gave a heavy sigh.

“Fine,” he said. “Fine. Sit down then Lan Zhan, A-Yuan. Let's figure out what the hell we're going to do.”

## Chapter End Notes

\*Just as a quick disclaimer, I disagree with Lan Zhan's analysis that adopting A-Yuan was the selfish thing to do, but I can see him thinking that way, especially while there's so much to process and figure out.\*

Thank you so much for reading, I really hope you enjoyed it! Until next time, take care.

# Chapter 11

## Chapter Notes

Thank you so, so much for all the lovely comments, and to everyone who's bookmarking and leaving kudos! I hope you all enjoy this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Once again, Wangji found himself sitting beside Wei Ying, but this time it was Sizhui who was on Wangji's other side, rather than Wen Ning. Jingyi sat very close to Sizhui again, murmuring urgently to him, but Sizhui just smiled and nodded, and squeezed his hand, and after a moment Jingyi relaxed slightly. Ouyang Zizhen sat beside Jingyi, but it was Wen Ning who was on his other side, and then Wen Qing. The circle had tightened somewhat – Jin Zixuan had not left a gaping space between himself and Wen Qing as Jiang Wanyin had initially, though he was not as close to her as he was to Jin Ling, who was wedged between his parents. Jiang Wanyin was similarly wedged between his siblings – Wei Ying's hand was still on his brother's knee, and Jiang Yanli had deposited her baby into Jiang Wanyin's arms.

Wangji tried not to wonder what it was Wei Ying had told his siblings while he was exiled outside. He knew it was none of his business, and that he had no right to know, but Jiang Wanyin still looked shaken, and Wei Ying's eyes were still a little watery. At a glance, Jiang Yanli seemed to have regained her composure, but her fingers were white around the bell that hung from her waist, and her other hand was tucked around Jiang Wanyin's elbow.

For a long moment, no one spoke. No one seemed quite sure how to break the silence. There was so much to untangle, so much to understand and to plan and to solve, and Wangji had no idea where on earth they should begin.

Then a small voice broke the silence.

"It can't happen again. The, the death of the Wens, the, the fight at Nightless City, the – it can't happen again. It can't," murmured Jin Ling, staring intently at the ground and clutching tightly at his robes.

"It won't," Wei Ying swore, smiling slightly at Jin Ling. "We won't let it. Things are already better, aren't they? Since Jin Zixuan has managed to keep himself alive, thanks to you, no one has any reason to besiege us."

Concern tugged at Wangji's gut, and he thought of the messages he had sent to his brother and uncle. He prayed that they would be enough to alleviate his clan's anger, should they hear of Wen Ning's involvement in Lan Yu's disappearance the way that Wen Qing feared they could.

“We can’t count on that,” said Wen Qing tightly. “Jin Guangyao is smart enough to twist this into something dangerous – either one of him. The longer everyone stays here without being seen outside, the easier it will be. Wei Wuxian kidnapped Jin Zixuan, made him into a puppet, used him to kidnap his sister and Jiang-zongzhu, and Hanguang Jun... Or perhaps Yunmeng Jiang is in collusion with the Yiling Patriarch, and it was a plot between Jiang-zongzhu, his sister and Wei Wuxian to kidnap Jin Zixuan and his son.”

Wei Ying stared at her, his face crumbling. “Oh... right,” he said, his voice soft and bitter. “I’m the Yiling Patriarch. I’m just that evil.”

Lan Wangji frowned heavily. “Not evil.”

The corner of Wei Ying’s mouth twitched towards a sad smile. “Ah well, if you say so Lan Zhan.”

Lan Wangji’s frown deepened, but Wei Ying’s smile softened, and he bumped his shoulder against Wangji’s, before staring back down at his hands.

The silence returned for a moment, until Sizhui put everyone’s thoughts into words in a hesitant voice.

“Where... where do we even start?” Even as the boy spoke, however, the answer came to Wangji’s mind, and he nodded.

“Today,” he said. Everyone stared at him. “The events of today are irrefutable. True, witnesses from the future may not be deemed credible. It may not be wise to say where they’re from. But Wei Ying was invited. Wei Ying was ambushed. There were two flutes. We know this. Jin Zixuan can bear witness. With this known, no one can attack Wei Ying.”

“Even with the word of Jin-gongzi, it would be difficult to prove,” said Wen Qing uncertainly. “The world has already decided we are all as evil as Wen Ruohan, perhaps Wei Wuxian more so.”

Wei Ying flinched, and Lan Wangji’s heart burnt.

“The world is wrong,” he said. Then, he added, “There is proof. You say Su She cursed Jin Zixun. He bears scars.”

But Wen Qing shook her head. There was a look uncomfortably akin to pity on her face. “It won’t be enough to convince people of Wei Wuxian’s innocence.”

Lan Wangji frowned. “Lanling Jin broke their word. Wei Ying was to be asked to hand in the Stygian Tiger Amulet after the ceremony. If he refused, he was to be allowed to return here. That is the condition under which I wrote the letter. That was the understanding of Gusu Lan. On orders of Jin-zongzhu or alone, Jin Zixun broke the trust. It is reason to investigate.”

Jin Zixuan nodded. “It’s reason enough to pause,” he added. “Even if it takes a while for the truth to come out.” He paused himself, looking thoughtful. “We could buy more time, too with the amulet.”

Wei Ying stiffened, his eyes narrowing dangerously. “Do you think so, Jin-gongzi? After everything you’ve heard, you think I should just hand it in to them now? Because I’m sure you don’t mean ‘use it on them,’ which I swear I’d do before I surrendered it to Jinlintai!”

Jin Zixuan opened his mouth, but Lan Jingyi cut into the conversation with a heavy frown. “Why should it be handed in to Lanling Jin anyway? Didn’t Wei-qianbei make it himself? Doesn’t that make it his? What has Lanling Jin got to do with Wei Wuxian? If it was handed in to anybody it should be Yunmeng Jiang. Even if he is Chief Cultivator, I don’t see how Jin Guangshan could claim it just because he wants it.”

It was a good point, and Wangji wondered how none of them could have brought it up before, but Jiang Wanyin’s jaw was clenched, and there was dull resignation in Wei Ying’s eyes for a moment, before they snapped onto Jin Zixuan, and became angry once more.

However, Jin Zixuan had clearly taken advantage of Jingyi’s distraction to better arrange his thoughts, because he spoke before Wei Ying could. “I didn’t say surrender it, or use it. What I meant was to ask if there was a way it could be taken out of the equation. Can it be destroyed?”

Wei Ying flinched, but hope leapt in Wangji’s heart. He loathed the Stygian Tiger Amulet like nothing else in the world – he hated what it did to Wei Ying, the target it put on his back, the damage it did to his soul. If it was destroyed, if it could never hurt him again... that could not be a bad thing.

“Can anybody give me a nice, favourable choice?” Wei Ying had said on the day Wangji visited Yiling, his voice low and earnest. “A choice that I could protect who I want to protect, without studying crafty tricks and using the Stygian Tiger Amulet?”

Maybe, just maybe, they would now be able to offer Wei Ying that choice.

“...because it’s what my father wants,” Jin Zixuan was saying. “If it’s destroyed, no one can claim it, and he will have no immediate reason to attack you or the Burial Mounds. If I can get back to Jinlintai to give an account of what happened in the pass, and provide proof that Wei Wuxian has destroyed the amulet, the other clans will have to listen.”

“They’ll come up with another excuse to attack,” said Jingyi bitterly, folding his arms over his chest. “Jin Guangyao said as much in the temple.”

“But it will take them more than a day to do it,” said Jin Zixuan, gaining a little momentum. “By that time we can have a better plan, and a better defence. If there’s no immediate cause for you to be attacked, there’s time to prove your innocence. And... time to ensure the Wen are treated fairly.”

Wei Ying stiffened again, his hands clenching once more into fists, but Wangji could see the fear in the clench of his jaw. “What do you mean by that? Your father claimed to be treating them fairly before!”

“And it looks like my father lied,” said Jin Zixuan, turning his eyes to Wen Qing. “Wen-guniang, may I ask you how many of the people here are cultivators?”



Lan Wangji saw Wen Ning shuffle uncomfortably, but Wen Qing simply raised her chin. “Other than me and Wei Wuxian, there are four cultivators here. They are all of Dafan Wen, not Qishan – they specialise in medicine. None of them fought in the war. They have not killed anybody. If you suggest they are any guiltier than the other doctors and farmers and merchants here because they are cultivators, I would remind you they are still civilians, and all but one are in their seventies. I will not tell you who they are.”

To Lan Wangji’s surprise, Jin Zixuan did not get defensive as Wen Qing’s voice grew sharper. Instead, he bowed his head.

“Wen-guniang, I have no intention of persecuting your family. But if we can prove their innocence, then we can better guarantee their safety. Jin-zongzhu has declared them all war criminals. We will need to offer proof to the contrary for anyone to believe it.” Jin Zixuan paused, and then drew himself upright, taking a deep breath. “I would like to talk to your family, and hear for myself what happened in the camps – but that can wait until they are all safe. For now, for me, it will be enough if you, Wen-gongzi, and Wei Wuxian will swear to me here and now that none of them killed our people during the war.”

Wen Qing blinked, but her chin remained high as she said, “I swear it.”

“I know these people,” said Wei Ying, his voice ringing with sincerity. “None of them are murderers. Only one of them has ever owned a sword. I swear to their innocence.”

“T-truly, Jin-gongzi,” stammered Wen Ning, “They, they haven’t hurt anybody.”

Jin Zixuan nodded. “I believe you. Then we shall prove that, and ensure that they can live safely and freely. That will be easier to do if it’s obvious they’re not a threat – and if there’s no amulet behind them.”

“It’s irrelevant,” said Wei Ying, his voice sharp. “The second the amulet is destroyed, the wards around the Burial Mounds will weaken to the point where even Jin Zixun could get through them. We’d all be dead before we got a chance to ‘prove our innocence.’ I don’t know about Wen Qing and Wen Ning, but I’d rather live here than get pardoned after I’m dead. I can’t give up the only thing protecting these people. I can’t.”

“But you’re not the only thing protecting them anymore,” protested Jiang Wanyin.

“Jiang Cheng,” Wei Ying began, but Wangji cut him off to voice his agreement with Jiang Wanyin.

“Mn.”

“Lan Zhan-”

“I may not have the backing of my clan behind me, but in case I didn’t make myself obvious enough, for what it’s worth my protection is offered to the Wens, too,” said Jin Zixuan, and beside him Jiang Yanli nodded sombrely.

“We can take them somewhere safe, A-Xian, somewhere more easily defended. Then, not only would any enemies have to fight their way through us, they would also have to find us first,” she said.

“Shijie, if there was anywhere else to go don’t you think we’d already be there?” Wei Ying asked wearily, and Wangji’s heart hurt. So far, he’d managed not to think too much about how thin Wei Ying was, how deep the bags beneath his eyes were, but the Burial Mounds were obviously taking their toll.

Wistfully, Wangji wondered whether Wei Ying would have come to Gusu if he had extended the invitation to the Wens.

“No,” said Jiang Wanyin stubbornly. “Because you’re an idiot. We’ll go back to Lotus Pier.”

For a moment, Wei Ying just stared at his brother with his mouth open, but then he shook his head. “What?”

“We will go back to Lotus Pier,” said Jiang Wanyin slowly, emphasising each syllable far more than necessary. “Should’ve done it ages ago.”

Wei Ying’s cheeks burnt red, but Wangji could see his hands trembling, too. “Oh?” He said, a twang of bitterness in his voice. “I didn’t realise we were all invited.”

“I’m inviting you all now!”

“Yeah, well-”

“A-Xian, A-Cheng.”

There was a pause, and then Wei Ying looked at his brother and ducked his head. “Sorry, Shijie.”

“Sorry, A-Jie,” Jiang Wanyin mumbled in the same moment, and she smiled fondly at them.

“In any case, A-Cheng is right,” she said. “Lotus Pier makes the most sense.”

“But Shijie, the Jiang Clan is still too vulnerable,” Wei Ying protested. “Why do you think I defected? I knew the clan can’t defend me, I’ve known all along! I don’t expect them to! I’ve brought enough disaster to Yunmeng Jiang, I can’t put them in danger again, I can’t. And they would be - their numbers are too small, and Jiang Cheng has no backup among any of the clans, and he’s the youngest of all the clan leaders, and-”

“And the disciples we do have are as loyal as you can get,” said Jiang Wanyin, his chin rising. “And until the Wens are exonerated if we say, ‘these are villagers of Yunmeng who have been here forever’ our disciples will reply ‘yes of course that’s obvious, why are you telling me that?’”

“Jiang Cheng-”

“You know they still call you Da-shixiong? Even the ones that have never met you,” said Jiang Wanyin, and Wei Ying fell silent.

“The Wen Clan burnt down Lotus Pier,” said Wen Qing, but her voice was softer than it had been all day. Still, Jiang Wanyin flinched at it. “Would Yunmeng Jiang truly be so forgiving?”

“No one here took part in the massacre at Lotus Pier,” said Jiang Wanyin.

“And how do you know that?” pressed Wen Qing, as though she had not just sworn to her family’s innocence.

Jiang Wanyin stared at her. “Wei Wuxian is here, and they are all alive.”

Wen Qing’s eyes widened slightly, but then she gave a small smile and nodded. “Fair enough.”

“Okay, okay,” said Wei Ying, looking almost distressed. “Even if that was possible, how would we get everyone there? There are fifty odd people here, how would we get them all to Lotus Pier safely?”

“Distraction,” Lan Wangji said. “Jin Zixuan and Jiang Wanyin can report to Jinlintai, give an account. They will need to anyway. The rest of us can move then. By river, it would be swift.”

“And if the clans decide to attack Lotus Pier?” pressed Wei Ying, fresh fear burning amidst the old grief in his eyes.

Lan Wangji felt a shudder run down his spine, though he refused to let himself move with it. “They will not.” Wei Ying looked pleadingly at him, and Wangji understood – his faith had been shaken too, by what the juniors had said. But still, “The attack on Lotus Pier was the impetus to start the Sunshot Campaign. People think poorly of the Wen. Not the Jiang. It would take much convincing to launch an attack. Won’t happen.”

“He’s right,” said Jin Zixuan firmly. “A-Li is my wife, and the Jiang are our allies. Even my father couldn’t take a risk like that – he is not stupid, and he’d know that would make him look too much like he is following in the footsteps of Wen Ruohan. Perhaps, if he thought he could convince the Nie and the Lan he might try something, but he would need time to convince them and he’s not going to get it.”

“It is dangerous, A-Xian,” said Jiang Yanli gently. “But everything is, now. We don’t need to hide your friends forever. Just long enough to prove their innocence, and yours, and to call Jin Guangyao, Jin Zixun and Jin Guangshan to account.”

Wei Ying snorted. “Like that’s possible.”

“The world turned on them both in a matter of minutes,” said Jin Ling, his voice strangely blank. “It’s possible.”

“But how?”

Silence. Then, “We don’t need to decide that in this minute,” said Jiang Yanli. “It should come second to ensuring that everyone is safe. For the most part, justice can wait. But the Jin Guangyao of your timeline – he is a more immediate threat. We need to know what to do about him.”

“Stab him,” said Jingyi bluntly. “In the face.”

“Jingyi,” Sizhui chided gently, though it sounded more like a force of habit than a genuine reprimand.

“That would depend on whether we could stab him in the face in private or not,” said Jiang Wanyin with a scowl. “If we just stab Jin Guangyao in front of witnesses it won’t help anyone’s reputation.”

Jin Zixuan shifted uncomfortably. “I’m still not sure that A-Yao as we know him deserves to die.”

Lan Wangji frowned heavily, and his disagreement seemed to be shared, if Jiang Wanyin’s snort, Jiang Yanli’s furrowed brow and the tightness of Wen Qing’s jaw were anything to go by.

“He arranged an ambush of Wei-qianbei based on false charges that nearly killed you this morning!” protested Lan Jingyi, with a surprising amount of aggression for a Lan. It might have made Wangji question the boy’s identity, if he wasn’t very much aware that his cousin Haoran was just as spirited as his son seemed to be.

“I am aware,” said Jin Zixuan, frowning down at his hands. “But... he is my brother. And I believed he was... a friend.” The way that Jin Zixuan said the word ‘friend’ was strangely familiar to Wangji. There was an uncertainty behind it, but it was genuine and heartfelt, and Lan Wangji wondered if he had more in common with Jin Zixuan than he thought. He had assumed the heir of Jin Guangshan thought himself above the friendship of others, but perhaps he simply found interacting with people as difficult as Lan Wangji did. “I would not see him killed before I heard what he had to say for himself.”

“Zewu Jun said speaking to him was a bad idea because he gets inside your head,” said Jingyi stubbornly, though his face was sympathetic. “He wouldn’t’ve ever been able to defeat Jiang-zongzhu if he hadn’t upset him so much first.”

Lan Wangji considered that for a moment, unease coiling in his gut. In truth, it never seemed to take much to upset Jiang Wanyin, but Wangji had never seen him lose his edge on the battlefield because of it. He wondered what Jin Guangyao could have possibly said to trigger the young clan leader to fail in a fight, but it was unlikely to be anything good. When he glanced over, Wangji saw that Jiang Wanyin’s face was stone white, and Wei Ying was squeezing his knee tightly. The dread in Wangji’s gut grew colder.

“Even so,” said Jin Zixuan. “He is my brother. Besides, if we killed him without any form of trial or chance to provide an explanation or defence, wouldn’t we be just as bad as him?”

Jingyi scowled, but he also nodded.

“I don’t think everything he ever did was evil,” said Jin Ling quietly, his eyes on the ground. “He – I don’t think every kindness he ever showed could be fake. He... he said he cared about me, and he – he gave me Fairy.”

“Fairy?” Jin Zixuan frowned.

“My dog,” said Jin Ling sadly. “I miss her.”

Jiang Wanyin made a sound like he’d been punched in the gut. “I let you have a dog?”

“Jiang Cheng,” Wei Ying murmured softly as Jin Ling nodded. The boy gave a weak, watery smile.

“The only dog allowed at Lotus Pier,” he said proudly, and Jiang Yanli gave a small, sad smile of her own. “She... she was-” he stopped abruptly, shaking his head, but then he smiled again. This time it was a little stronger, almost wry, and he looked at Wei Ying. “You hated her.”

“Well of course he hated her!” scoffed Jingyi. “She bit Little Apple.”

At once, Jin Ling scowled. “He kicked her first!”

“Only because she growled!”

“He-”

“Wait, wait, wait!” said Wei Ying holding his hands up. “Who is Little Apple?”

“Your donkey.”

Wei Ying’s eyes widened, a look of glee spreading across his face, and he turned to Wen Qing, “Ha! I won!”

“Won what?” asked Jiang Wanyin suspiciously.

Wen Ning smiled faintly. “A, a little while ago Wei-gongzi bought a donkey in the marketplace –”

“To help with the farming, because I am a clever person,” said Wei Ying sagely.

“A-Jie said it was too loud, and, and a waste of money,” Wen Ning explained. “She made him trade it for a cart instead.”

“A cart can be used for many things,” said Wen Qing unapologetically. “A donkey is another mouth to feed.”

“Well, I got my donkey in the end, didn’t I? You couldn’t stop me forever!” said Wei Ying smugly, but then his expression froze. The joy bled out of his face, leaving a horror so stark it was clear he was remembering just why Wen Qing had not been there to stop him.

Wen Qing gave a smile far gentler than any Wangji had ever seen from her. “Maybe one day we will find you donkey, Wei Wuxian.” There was a moment of pause as Wei Ying recovered his composure, sending Wen Qing a cheeky grin that did not meet his eyes. She inclined her head ever so slightly, and then looked around the circle. “We are getting off track. Jin Guangyao.”

“We need a way to distinguish between the two,” said Wei Ying, frowning heavily.

“How about we call future Jin Guangyao ‘Horrible Unhinged Lunatic?’” suggested Jingyi, and Wei Wuxian shook his head.

“That’s too much of a mouthful.” He paused for a moment, considering.

“His name was Meng Yao before, wasn’t it?” said Zizhen, glancing around for confirmation before he continued. “Then we could just use that to refer to the younger one, and Jin Guangyao for the one that’s from the future.”

A murmur of agreement ran around the room, though out of the corner of his eye Lan Wangji saw Jingyi lean close to Sizhui, and heard him quietly mutter, “I still think Horrible Unhinged Lunatic is better.” Sizhui shushed him.

“Jin Guangyao is too dangerous,” said Lan Wangji, thinking of his brother. “Must be stopped. Meng Yao... a trial would be just.”

“Easier said than done,” muttered Jiang Wanyin. “But I agree.”

“Do you think he will declare himself? Jin Guangyao?” said Jiang Yanli, a light frown on her face.

“I think it would be a mistake to assume we have any clue what he’s going to do,” said Wei Ying darkly. “He’s too clever.”

Jin Ling frowned, looking down at his hands. “He is very clever... But what... what he wanted - he wanted everything to go back to the way it was before, for Zewu Jun to still think of him as a friend. If he thinks he has a chance to make that happen, I don’t think he’d risk losing it. I think he’ll keep quiet, at least for now.”

“In that case, so should you,” said Wei Ying seriously, looking at each of the four juniors. “At least in regards to who you are.”

“That’s what you said before,” said Jin Ling, looking rather uncomfortable. “You said it would be too dangerous to tell people.”

“Why?” asked Jiang Yanli, her brow furrowed. “Failing to speak the truth seems to have caused more problems than it’s solved.” Once again, Jiang Wanyin flinched slightly, and Wei Ying leant into his shoulder a little.

“Several reasons,” said Wei Ying. “First, people might not believe them, or might think they’re ghosts or demons, and try to hurt them. Even if not, they’ll be hounded all their lives by people crowing to know their futures, even though none of them will really have a clue.

Some people will think they're a threat, either to people's safety or to their lives or to orthodoxy. And some might try to recreate the ritual." He paused. "It requires so much energy... if that spell went wrong, it could blow up half a town. I think it would be far simpler to keep it quiet, as much as we can. They'll be safer."

Jin Ling fidgeted, his fingers wrapping around the clarity bell that hung from his belt. "Does..." he asked quietly, and he seemed to shrink. "Does that mean we... we have to give up who we are?"

Ouyang Zizhen flinched, and Jingyi's mouth fell open, but Sizhui just looked down, his head bowed with resignation. He had already been willing to surrender his ribbon – not eager, but willing – and Wangji remembered that his name had been changed once before.

"What do you mean?" asked Jin Zixuan, his voice tight.

"If... if no one knows where we came from... that's Jin Ling," said Jin Ling, pointing at the baby. "So I – I'm... We'll have to change our names, won't we?"

"That doesn't seem fair," Jingyi muttered miserably. "We've had them longer." Everyone looked at him, and he squirmed slightly, his knee pressing against Sizhui's. "I – I understand, but it... it's not fair."

Lan Wangji agreed. Very little of this seemed fair on behalf of the juniors. They had been pulled from everything and everyone they knew, and thrown into the middle of a political mess far too big for them. They had already lost everything they ever owned. To sacrifice their identities on top of that did not just seem unfair, but cruel.

"I don't think you'll have to give up who you are, not entirely," Wei Ying said slowly, looking thoughtfully at his nephew. "You go by Jin Ling most of the time, right?" The boy's eyes widened and he nodded, ducking his gaze, but Wei Ying smiled, knocking his shoulder against Jiang Wanyin's. "Like Jiang Cheng. In that case, we can still call you Jinling – we'll just say it's your courtesy name. You could use Yu as your family name, and say you're a cousin of Shijie and Jiang Cheng's – that way no one will question why you look so much like them. We could even say that the baby looked so much like you did that Shijie named him A-Ling as an inside joke." Wei Ying paused thoughtfully, but only for a moment. "If we say your parents were killed in the Sunshot campaign, and you joined the Jiang Clan in the aftermath, it would explain why no one outside of Yunmeng has seen you before. You would still bear the name Jin, still honour your father and his ancestors. You wouldn't have to give up your name, not completely. If we make a habit of calling the baby Rulan, it would rarely be confusing."

Jin Ling stared at Wei Ying for a long moment, his eyes round and surprised, but then he blinked and nodded ever so slightly. "Yu Jinling... I... I could live with that."

Wei Ying smiled, and then looked at Ouyang Zizhen. "Do you still want to keep your parents out of this until the dust has settled?"

The boy nodded with a slight wince. "They'll only complicate things at this stage. After... afterwards, I'd like to talk to them, but..."

Wei Ying nodded sombrely. “I understand. For now, I think you should be able to get away with going by your courtesy name. As for a family name... you can borrow mine for a while, if you want?” Ouyang Zizhen’s eyes widened, and Wei Ying’s words picked up speed, almost tumbling over themselves as they left his lips. “I understand why you wouldn’t want to, only my father was a part of the Jiang clan and so it wouldn’t be too strange to have a cousin from Yunmeng Jiang called Wei, and that way no one outside the Jiang Clan would wonder where you came from. And it would only be temporary, only until you and your parents decide what it is you want to do –”

Ouyang Zizhen stood up and bowed low, smiling a little shyly. “Thank you, Wei-qianbei. I would be honoured.”

Wei Ying stopped talking, and smiled back at the young man – and then he stiffened, his hands curling into fists and his eyes glazing over slightly.

“Wei Ying?” Wangji asked, but in that moment he heard the sound of yelling outside, and then one of the Wens tumbled into the cave. It was one of the women, and her eyes were wide with fear as she gasped for breath.

“Wei-gongzi, Wei-gongzi!”

Wei Ying was already on his feet. “Who is it?”

The woman shook her head desperately, clutching at her chest. “I don’t know, I don’t know, I’ve never seen them before, but, but there’s more than two dozen of them and they look like they’re of Gusu Lan and – and – and Wei-gongzi, they – they’re furious.”

## Chapter End Notes

I know this chapter is more 'sitting in a cave talking' but I promise we will be getting more plot advancement in the next one.

Also, a note on names: From now on, when referring to our teenage Jin Ling I will be writing it 'Jinling' all in one word as it's now being used as his courtesy name. For the sake of avoiding confusion I will do my best to refer to the baby as Rulan almost exclusively but do let me know if things are getting too confusing.

In regards to Meng Yao/Jin Guangyao I have gone through about fifty iterations in my head as to what would be the LEAST confusing way of differentiating between them and I've decided to go with this way because I didn't want to throw around too many new names. So from now on Meng Yao = younger Jin Guangyao and Jin Guangyao = older Jin Guangyao. If you don't think this makes sense please do let me know!

Thank you for reading - until next time, please do take care!



# Chapter 12

## Chapter Notes

I honestly am blown away by how much you all are enjoying this story! Thank you for your wonderful comments, and for all the kudos and bookmarks! I hope you enjoy this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The very last thing Wei Wuxian wanted to be doing right now was running to the edge of the Burial Mounds to meet some angry Lans. His mind was still tumbling through everything he'd been told, trying to process and make sense of it, and his heart was still writhing with Jiang Cheng's pain about the core transfer, and he was struggling to comprehend the fact that Jiang Cheng somehow didn't see how his life was worth so much more than Wei Wuxian's.

A small part of him argued that that was not the point his siblings had been trying to make, but he ignored that as stubbornly as he ignored the rest of it. He didn't have time to do what he wanted, which was to cuddle up in a pile with Jiang Cheng and Shijie, and maybe his two A-Yuans as well, and just snuggle until his heart stopped hurting.

No. He didn't have time for that.

It was too dangerous.

So instead, he hurried down towards their gate, such as it was, with Lan Zhan on one side and Jiang Cheng on the other. Lan Jingyi trailed a few paces behind, his grandmother's sword clutched tight in his fingers, and Wen Ning followed him, sticking to the shadows and keeping out of sight.

Tension radiated from Jiang Cheng, and Lan Zhan walked far more stiffly than usual, but Wei Wuxian was cautiously optimistic. Wen Yingyue had clearly been terrified, but Zewu Jun was the most reasonable person he had ever met in his life – if Wei Wuxian had a chance to speak, Lan Xichen would listen.

“And you must make them listen, A-Xian,” Shijie had said, her voice low and urgent, concern tightening her eyes. “You cannot get angry – this cannot become a fight. That's what happened last time. You have to stay calm, and negotiate peacefully, and you have to make them listen.” She had paused then, and taken his hands in hers. It did little to soften the blow of her next words. “If you get angry, A-Xian, we'll all be in danger.”

Wei Wuxian had promised to behave with more fervour than he ever had before in his life.

But when they drew close enough to see who was standing at the gate, Wei Wuxian felt a flicker of alarm. Zewu Jun was nowhere to be seen. Instead, Lan Qiren was standing at the

entrance to the Burial Mounds, his sword drawn, and his face carved in fury. He did not look like a man in the mood for peaceful negotiation. Behind him were two lines of cultivators – thirty-two, according to his quick count – and beside him was a woman. Though she held no sword, she bore a knife in each hand, and when her eyes set on Wei Wuxian they narrowed, and a chill ran down his spine.

Whoever this woman was, she was dangerous.

Wei Wuxian stopped before he reached the gate, bowing low. Out of the corners of his eyes he saw Lan Zhan and Jiang Cheng do the same, but when he rose Lan Qiren's fury was only carved deeper into his face.

“Lan Yu is safe,” said Lan Zhan, before anyone else could speak. Wei Wuxian noticed that he was addressing the woman as much as he was his uncle, and he wondered if she was Lan Jingyi's mother. “Unharmmed.”

“Where is he?” the woman demanded. “Er-gongzi, where is he?”

“Inside,” said Lan Zhan.

“Wen Yingyue told us there was an army of angry cultivators at our door,” said Wei Wuxian, trying to make himself sound calm and reasonable. It was not something he usually bothered with, but then he wasn't usually actively trying not to anger Lan Qiren. “We hoped it would be you, but we thought it safer to leave Lan Yu inside, just in case. He is with Jin Zixuan, and my Shijie.”

“Wei Ying!” Lan Qiren grit out, his voice trembling with a rage and a hatred that surely went against several of the rules carved into the wall of Cloud Recesses. Wei Wuxian thought of A-Yuan, and how he would feel if he woke up one day to find his little one gone, and a trail of blood on the floor, and he thought that he understood. “Does your depravity know no bounds? How dare you take a child of the Lan sect – how dare you speak to us of his safety now? The Yiling Patriarch – you are even more twisted and evil than your reputation would have us believe!”

The words stung worse than Wei Wuxian expected them to. He knew, of course, that Lan Qiren had never liked him, and he had never much liked Lan Qiren, but he did respect him, and he appreciated how he seemed to look out for Lan Zhan. For the hatred to run so deep...

Lan Qiren did not give him any time to answer before he snapped out, “Wangji! Come here.”

Wei Wuxian looked expectantly at Lan Zhan, who –

Stayed put.

And said nothing.

Well. Appeasing Lan Qiren just got significantly more difficult, if the steadily reddening colour of his cheeks was anything to go by.

“Lan-xiansheng,” Wei Wuxian said, as calmly as he could, “I didn’t take Lan Yu from his home. I’d never even seen him until this morning, when the boy who rescued him showed up as I was being ambushed by Jin Zixun. Jin Zixuan will testify to this. We had reason to believe that Jinlintai was not safe, so I had Wen Ning bring him here.”

“The Ghost General?” the woman whispered, paling. She took a step closer to the gate, raising her knives. “You gave my grandson to the Ghost General?”

“Wen Ning would never harm any child,” said Wei Wuxian firmly. “If he had the choice, he would never harm an adult, for that matter. You are Lan Yu’s grandmother?”

She nodded, and Lan Zhan said, “Lu Meilin.”

Wei Wuxian bowed again. “Then I am sorry for how worried you must’ve been – must be. I think I can imagine –”

“You can imagine?” the woman snapped, and Lan Qiren didn’t even look like he was considering telling her off for interrupting. “I don’t think you can – unless the Yiling Patriarch has a child of his own?”

“Wei Ying has a child,” said Lan Zhan, before Wei Wuxian could speak. “A little younger than A-Yu.”

Lu Meilin let out a cold bark of a laugh. “And where did you snatch that child from, Yiling Patriarch?”

“The labour camp at Qiongqi pass,” said Wei Wuxian, unable to keep the bite from his voice. “He was imprisoned there. He had just turned two, at the time.”

Lu Meilin’s eyes widened, and Lan Qiren stiffened, looking slightly taken aback.

“I would never hurt a child,” said Wei Wuxian, forcing his voice to calm down again. “And I never have. The person that took Lan Yu from Cloud Recess wasn’t trying to hurt him, but someone was, and I will explain everything if you agree to sheath your swords.”

“We will do no such thing,” said one of the other Lan, raising his pointed chin and glaring down his nose at Wei Wuxian. “We will not fall for your lies, Yiling Patriarch – your evil is known to us, and we will not leave here until it is eliminated!”

Lan Zhan stiffened, opening his mouth, but before he could speak Lan Jingyi bundled his way between them to plant himself in front of Wei Wuxian. Before they had a chance to explain who he was. Or that he was even there.

This was not part of the plan, and neither were the angry words that tumbled from the boy’s mouth.

“Wei-qianbei isn’t evil, and if you want to eliminate him, you’ll have to go through all of us first!”

For a moment, Wei Wuxian was so shocked all he could do was stare dumbly at the back of Jingyi's head.

"That is my sword," growled Lu Meilin, her eyes narrowing again. "You – you stole my sword, *you* took my grandson!"

"I borrowed your sword!" said Jingyi quickly, the anger in his voice giving way to sheepishness. "I'm sorry, and I'm sorry I scared you. But I can explain..." He held out the sword.

And then made to step outside of the gate.

"Hey, hey!" Wei Wuxian cried, grabbing the back of his robes to yank him back even as the Lans outside raised their weapons. Jingyi's eyes widened, and he stumbled back, a wounded look on his face. "Maybe wait until they're not going to stab you before you go out of the wards, kid," he muttered, and Jingyi looked up at him. There was a sadness in his eyes so deep that it hurt, but he nodded, and kept his head up.

"Who are you?" Lan Qiren asked dangerously. "Do tell me why I shouldn't put you to death for kidnapping, and for impersonating a member of Gusu Lan?"

Jingyi's eyes widened further and he stumbled back, closer to Wei Wuxian, who felt a stab of sympathy at the shock and pain on the boy's face. Though Jingyi wore a spare set of Wei Wuxian's own robes, his forehead ribbon was sacred enough that in itself it would indeed be enough to count as impersonation – *if* that was the case.

"He's not impersonating anyone, and yes, he borrowed the sword, but he didn't 'kidnap' Lan Yu. Please, Lan-xiansheng, Lan-qianbei, I can explain," Wei Wuxian said, holding up a hand in what he hoped was a placating manner. Unfortunately, given that his other hand was still grabbing Jingyi's robes, he raised the hand with Chenqing in it, and Lan Qiren rose his sword.

"Shufu!" said Lan Zhan, stepping forward in front of both Jingyi and Wei Wuxian, standing so close to the ward its energy danced over his nose with a soft, buzzing light. "It is not what it seems."

"Wangji!"

"We really can explain," said Wei Wuxian, stuffing Chenqing into the back of his belt and tugging Lan Zhan out of the way. There had been far too many people planting themselves between him and danger today, but he would have to deal with that later. "If you sheath your swords, you and Lan Yu's grandmother can come in and fetch him – if you don't want to do that, Jiang Cheng will go and get him and bring him here. We have no intention to hurt him, or to keep him from you for a single second longer. But please, Lan-xiansheng, the last thing I want is to start another war. All we do want is to explain. I haven't touched Lan Yu, and I have no ill intentions towards your clan."

"You are harbouring an imposter," spat Lan Qiren, but Lan Zhan spoke sharply.

“No. Not an imposter. This-” he paused, his eyes flickering to the crowd behind his uncle. Then he stepped through the gate, and Wei Wuxian tried to pretend his heart didn’t trip as Lan Zhan left his protection. Bowing deeply before his uncle, Lan Zhan spoke again. “Shufu, things are complicated. Please come inside, with Lu Meilin. We will explain. No one will be harmed. You taught us to stand with justice, and protect the innocent, and that is what we are trying to do. The rules tell us to be righteous, to be mighty, to protect the vulnerable. We –” He broke off, hesitating for a moment, and then he bowed lower. “Shufu, please. We need your help.”

Lan Qiren did not move. Neither did Lan Zhan. Wei Wuxian stayed as still as he could, in case he broke whatever standoff was going on here, but out of the corner of his eye he could see Jingyi’s chest rising far more quickly and shallowly than it should. He reached out and squeezed the boy’s wrist, and Jingyi jumped, staring at him.

“Breathe,” he murmured. “Whatever happens, I’ll keep you safe.”

Jingyi swallowed, but then he nodded, a small smile tugging at his lips. “I know.”

Wei Wuxian blinked, a little taken aback. The trust this boy had in him – the trust all four of their time-travellers seemed to have in him – he didn’t understand it. They looked at him as though he could solve every problem in the world, as though he could keep them from any sort of danger, but from the stories they’d told him all he ever did was make things worse.

The sound of a sword sliding into its sheath drew Wei Wuxian’s attention back to where Lan Zhan was still bowing. Without acknowledging his nephew, Lan Qiren turned to Lu Meilin.

“Are you willing, Meilin?”

“I did not come here to wait outside, Qiren,” she relied, her tone only just hovering on this side of respectful, and Lan Qiren nodded.

“Very well. Take us to Lan Yu, give your explanation. We shall decide what to do then.”

Jiang Cheng exhaled softly at Wei Wuxian’s side. “Thank you, Lan-xiansheng,” he said softly, and Lan Qiren’s sharp eyes snapped onto him.

“I hope Jiang-zongzhu will have a good explanation,” he said curtly, and Jiang Cheng bowed his head. He didn’t say anything else, but Wei Wuxian didn’t expect him to. Even now, his little brother was still reeling, still so upset that just putting one foot in front of the other and keeping his pain from his face was a challenge. Wei Wuxian could see it, and he hated it, and he would have insisted that Jiang Cheng waited in the cave with the others if Shijie hadn’t pointed out that having a clan leader beside him – even one who was his brother – would be a good sign. Or if Jiang Cheng hadn’t looked so scared when he angrily muttered about Wei Wuxian getting into trouble when he wasn’t there.

Wei Wuxian stepped back, and Lan Qiren and Lu Meilin stepped through the gate. Beside him, Wei Wuxian felt Jingyi shudder slightly, and he glanced over to see a face so full of worry he squeezed the boy’s wrist again.

“Let’s get a way up the path,” he said. “I respect your disciples, Lan-xiansheng, but this is a matter that requires great trust, and I cannot afford to place the lives under my protection in the hands of those I don’t know.”

Lan Qiren did not look convinced, but he nodded. Before they could move, Jingyi held out the sword once again, offering the hilt to his grandmother with his head hung low. She took it without a word, and Jingyi shifted slightly closer to Wei Wuxian.

The silence was stiff as stone around them as they made their way up the path towards the inner Burial Mounds. Wei Wuxian stopped just before the woods cleared, turning to Lan Qiren and Lu Meilin.

“Lan Yu is just inside,” he said, inclining his head towards the palace. “Before we get him, I think it’s time for someone to introduce himself.” He looked down at Jingyi who swallowed, but then nodded, and bowed low to his two elders.

“My name is Lan Yu, courtesy name Jingyi,” he said, a meekness in his voice that didn’t seem to suit him at all. Lan Qiren’s eyes narrowed, and Lu Meilin’s grip on her sword grew tight. “I was sent back in time with three of my friends, to save our lives and to try to stop an upcoming battle that killed hundreds, in the life we knew. But the man who tried to kill us came back too, and he ended up with me in Cloud Recess. I knew that today was the morning of Jin Ling’s one month, that it was the day Jin Zixun would ambush Wei Wuxian and get Jin Zixuan killed and I knew if I told anyone who I was there’d be too many questions and there wasn’t time, so I thought I’d borrow Nainai’s sword. Technically, you told me I could once, on my eighth birthday, but... uh, anyway... I didn’t mean to wake A-Yu up, I didn’t know he’d be there, and... The man, the one who tried to kill us, he’d followed me, and when he figured out who A-Yu was he tried to kill him – I think because he thought it would kill *me*, so I grabbed A-Yu and I ran. I’m sorry I worried you, and I’m sorry for borrowing your sword.”

Lan Qiren and Lu Meilin stared, the former’s face pursed in disbelief, the latter’s blank, and unreadable. Jingyi was still bowing, unmoving, his face turned down to the floor, but Wei Wuxian could see his hands shaking. Sympathy tugged in his heart, and he touched the boy’s elbow, gently easing him up. Jingyi looked anxiously between him and the Lan Elders.

“It is true,” said Lan Zhan. “When told in full, the story makes sense. There is evidence.”

“Evidence?” Lan Qiren asked sharply.

Lan Zhan nodded. “Truth in their words. Details. Jinling has the same clarity bell Jiang Yanli just gave her baby. Sizhui has the rabbit I gave A-Yuan.”

Wei Wuxian blinked, but then he smiled. He didn’t know that, but thinking back to how Lan Zhan had been at the marketplace that day, he hadn’t been surprised. A thought sprung into his mind and out of his mouth before he could help it.

“Wait, did you *always* mean to give that to A-Yuan? I assumed it was something for Jin Ling, for the ceremony!”

The tips of Lan Zhan's ears grew slightly pink, but he nodded. "Xiongzhang brought Jin Rulan's gift."

Wei Wuxian beamed, the thought of Lan Zhan and baby A-Yuan together making his stomach feel all warm and fuzzy, until Lan Qiren said,

"Where is Xichen?"

At once, Lan Zhan stiffened, his eyes widening a fraction as he looked at his uncle. "He is not in Jinlintai?"

Lan Qiren frowned. "He did not leave the Pageant Hall with you?"

"No," said Lan Zhan, and there was something like fear in his voice. He spun around in an instant, his eyes meeting Wei Wuxian's desperately. "Jin Guangyao."

*"He wanted everything to go back to the way it was before, for Zewu Jun to still think of him as a friend. If he thinks he has a chance to make that happen, I don't think he'd risk losing it."*

Shit. *Shit.*

"He won't hurt him," Wei Wuxian said aloud, but Lan Zhan flinched ever so slightly. "Lan Zhan, if he wants things to go back to how they were he won't hurt him."

"Wangji," Lan Qiren said sharply. "What are you talking about? Where is your brother?"

"The man that came back through time and tried to kill Jingyi and A-Yu was Jin Guangyao," said Wei Wuxian, because Lan Zhan had gone so still it didn't seem like he would be speaking anytime soon. "Apparently even when he lost his mind, he wanted to hold onto Zewu Jun's friendship."

"What," Lan Qiren began, looking between Lan Zhan and Wei Wuxian with a deepening frown and widening eyes. "What – what?"

Wei Wuxian took a deep breath, and gave as short a version of the story that had been told in the cave as he could. It still took several long minutes, but by the end of which Lan Zhan still hadn't moved.

"...which is why we think our first step has to be destroying the amulet," Wei Wuxian finished firmly, pretending that the thought didn't make his gut squirm uncomfortably. "If I was mad enough to use it last time... we can't let anything like that happen again. It will be destroyed."

Lan Qiren stared at him for a long moment. "And the war criminals you are sheltering here? Are you hoping the world will forget?"

Anger rose hot in Wei Wuxian's chest, but Shijie's words were ice in his heart, and they kept it from taking control. If he got angry, everyone he loved was in danger. So, he took a deep breath, and thought about how to word his rebuttal –

And Lan Zhan got there first.

“No war criminals. There are none here,” he said. “Jin-zongzhu lied.”

Wei Wuxian nodded. “The people here are farmers, and merchants, and doctors. None of them fought in the war. None of them have ever taken a life before, except for Wen Ning, and he has only ever killed in self-defence.”

Lan Qiren’s stare was steel. “He killed two dozen guards at the camp in Qiongqi Pass.”

“Wen Ning killed *four* guards at Qiongqi Pass, and they were the ones who had killed *him*. The ones that drove a lure flag into his gut to use him as bait for a damned Night Hunt, all because he protested them whipping his grandmother! His innocent, non-cultivating grandmother!”

Lan Zhan’s hand closed around his wrist and squeezed slightly, and Wei Wuxian stopped short, clamping his mouth shut before his anger could spill out any further.

“Much wrong has been done to these people,” Lan Zhan said solemnly. “I will not turn away again.”

“Nor will I,” said Jiang Cheng, his voice mangled with a maze of emotion.

“Hm. I will wish to see these ‘civilians’ for myself before I make any decisions.”

Fear was a snake in Wei Wuxian’s chest, coiling around his heart, and he squared his shoulders. “I will let you speak to them. But respectfully Lan-xiansheng, regardless of what you decide, I will not let you hurt them.”

He felt Jiang Cheng stiffen beside him, and he knew that it was dangerously close to a threat, but he had to be understood.

Lan Qiren nodded. “Very well. I think we have waited long enough – where is Lan Yu?”

“This way,” Wei Wuxian said, leading the way into the clear yard before the Demon Subdue palace and whistling out a signal. Almost at once, the door cracked open, and Wen Qing peered out. She bowed low to Lan Qiren and Lu Meilin – and was then very nearly barrelled over by a shrieking blur of white robes and black hair.

“Nainai!” A-Yu cried delightedly, throwing his arms out wide as he launched himself into the air. Lu Meilin darted forwards, snatching him out of the air and holding him close, and Wei Wuxian couldn’t help but smile slightly as the boy wrapped his arms and legs around his grandmother. “Nainai, Nainai, you’re here!”

“A-Yu, are you hurt?” she asked urgently, pushing his little chest back away from her to look at his face. “Did they hurt you, A-Yu?”

“Nope!” A-Yu said happily. “Not even little bit! Big Me was too quick!”

“What happened, sweetheart? Can you tell Nainai what happened?”



A-Yu nodded enthusiastically, his hair whipping wildly around his face. “Uh huh! I just woke up in the night-time because I heard Big Me taking your sword down, and I said that was stealing and he said no it was borrowing and I said no it was stealing, because it is Nainai, because he didn’t ask first, and he said he was me from the future and that he needed it and I thought ‘hmm, maybe’ and then he showed that we match!” The boy thrust his wrist into his grandmother’s face with such gusto he might have broken her nose, had she not ducked back with the practised ease of a professional. “Matching freckles! And he does look quite a bit like Baba, which means I get to look like Baba too when I grow up, which is good because I love Baba.”

“And Baba loves you too,” said Lu Meilin sombrely. “Then what happened?”

A-Yu scowled fiercely. “Then, *then*, the bad man came in the window, and he tried to attack A-Yu! He went all-” The boy lunged and flailed his arm, nearly toppling himself out of his grandmother’s arms, and once again Wei Wuxian was impressed by her reflexes as she moved with him. “With a *knife* at A-Yu and I went-” He gasped, clapping his little hands to his cheeks, and Wei Wuxian fought back laughter. A-Yu did not sound afraid or upset – he sounded incredibly, furiously, indignant. “And then Big Me went whoosh-” he swung his hand down in a sweeping motion “-and grabbed me, and we went out of the window and up, up, up, and then we went flying, Nainai, we flied up and up and so fast, fast as fast as fast! Then I went to sleep. And then it was morning, and we were *still* flying because Big Me is very good at flying. We got to a big dippy place with a hill on this side and that side and some people were arguing, and Big Me said ‘hello we have problems!’ And they all talked and then I got to go with Ning-gege, and we went boing, boing, boing!” He mimed Wen Ning’s long leaps with his finger. “And came here!”

“Ning-gege?” repeated Lu Meilin tightly, and A-Yu gave an eager nod.

“Uh huh – Ning-gege is great! We were waiting for ages and ages in the little house where A-Yuan lives – A-Yuan’s a bit shy and he’s smaller than me, but he’s gonna be my friend soon and he played with Ning-gege and A-Yu – and, and Ning-gege told us stories and he let me fight him and I won!” A-Yu’s chest puffed out proudly, and Wei Wuxian failed to bite back his smile. Even as a fierce corpse, Wen Ning wasn’t one for sparring, but he often wrestled with A-Yuan – if you could call lying on the ground while a toddler clambered all over him and tugged gently at his hair wrestling. Occasionally, Wen Ning would go so far as to lift his cousin up in the air and pretend to shake him, and A-Yuan would screech in delight and wiggle around until he could drop out of Wen Ning’s grip and land on his chest, pinning him down with his chubby little fists and crowing out that he had won.

But Lu Meilin’s eyes were knives. “Fight?”

“Yep,” said A-Yu. “I just went ai-ya!” He mimed a punch. “And he fell down and I pounced, Nainai, and I got him and Ning-gege says I’m going to be a strong cultivator one day because I’m already so good! I want to be just like Ning-gege when I grow up.”

Wei Wuxian could not laugh. He couldn’t, because he could already see the veins jumping in Lan Qiren’s forehead, and the man looked alarming close to qi deviation, and it would be extremely inconvenient for Lan Zhan’s uncle to die on them.

He very nearly laughed anyway.

After a moment, Lan Qiren managed to compose himself, addressing the child in a voice only a feather softer than usual. "A-Yu, is this the bad man?" He pointed to Wei Wuxian, and Jiang Cheng and Lan Zhan stiffened. A-Yu's eyes widened slightly, but then he shook his head.

"No, Lan-xiansheng," he said, his voice a little slower. "That's Ning-gege's friend. The bad man looks more like Jin-gongzi and Jin-gongzi inside, but he's not them. He has a dot like they do, but he also has a hat. I think the bad man was mean to A-Yuan too, because A-Yuan got scared when they came here and his Popo says it's because Jin-gongzi and Jin-gongzi look like someone that was very mean to him." He paused, and then patted at his grandmother's neck. "Nainai, Nainai?"

"Yes, darling?"

"This..." A-Yu paused, his little lip sticking out slightly. "Nainai, I just... It's a little bit scary here – A-Yu isn't scared, A-Yu's brave like Baba, but... but it *is* dark, and it feels funny and outside it's scary... but Ning-gege and A-Yuan are nice people. Why do they have to live here?"

At once, Wei Wuxian felt his own jaw tighten, and when Lu Meilin glanced up at him and Lan Qiren, he kept his teeth tightly shut. This wasn't a question he would help anyone answer.

Instead, he stared at Lan Qiren, meeting his eyes intently and tilting his head ever so slightly, certain he couldn't be understood.

Why *did* A-Yuan have to live here?

Wei Wuxian was still waiting for someone to tell him.

After a long moment, Lu Meilin murmured a simple, "I don't know, love," and A-Yu frowned.

"We should take them home. A-Yuan could be my shidi!"

Out of the corner of his eye, Wei Wuxian saw Jingyi nod slightly, a satisfied grin on his face. When he saw Wei Wuxian looking he shrugged, and folded his arms. "Sizhui *is* my shidi."

"Meilin," said Lan Qiren. "Take A-Yu back to the others, and fall back to Yiling until further notice." He paused for a moment. "Send Lan Guiren and Lan Mingyu to Jinlintai - with any luck they shall find Xichen there, and we simply missed him." Wei Wuxian had never claimed to be able to read Lan Qiren's face, but even he thought he could see concern there now. It was clearer on the faces of the others - Jingyi's smile had fallen away, and he looked very pale, and Lu Meilin was frowning, her lips pressed together. Lan Zhan was still as stone, his expression utterly blank save from the fear in his eyes. Wei Wuxian felt worry twist in his own heart. If Zewu Jun really was *missing*... Well, it couldn't mean anything good. "I will stay to investigate further, and determine the best course of action."

Lu Meilin paused, looking at Jingyi. His head ducked down as she did, a vulnerable uncertainty on his face. She raised her chin. “If you truly are my grandson,” she said slowly, “What did I tell you on your sixteenth birthday?”

Jingyi grinned widely, but then his eyes flickered to Lan Qiren and his smile grew a little sheepish. “Uh...”

Something that looked strangely like mischief sparkled in Lu Meilin’s eye. “Go on. I’m sure Qiren won’t be surprised.”

Jingyi’s grin grew stronger again. “You told me the same thing you tell all your children and grandchildren on their sixteenth birthday – if, hypothetically, you were going to be a fool and go drinking, you should make sure to do it outside of Cloud Recess, but stay close enough to find your way back. And to start with jar of Emperor’s Smile, because if you’re going to be an idiot and break the rules it should at least be for a liquor that’s worth it. Hypothetically.”

Lan Qiren’s lips pursed in a tight line, his eyes flickering to the sky in a way that might even be close to an eyeroll, but Lu Meilin smiled, shaking her head slowly. “So you really are...” She sighed, staring down at the toddler in her arms. “It would be you, wouldn’t it A-Yu? Of all my grandchildren you’ve always been the most trouble.”

“A-Yu did nothing!” A-Yu protested, clearly offended. “A-Yu’s a good boy!”

Lu Meilin snorted, turning to Lan Qiren, who looked very much like he was sucking on a lemon. “Respectfully, Qiren, I would rather stay. I will not walk away from my grandson without knowing his safety is assured. I will pass your commands to the others.”

Qiren paused, and then gave a single nod. “A-Yu?”

Lu Meilin’s lips tightened, and she shifted the boy on her hip. “I would not be parted from either of my grandsons right now. Their parents are still away. They are my responsibility.”

“Very well,” said Lan Qiren, and Lu Meilin bowed low.

“Jiang Cheng can escort you to the gate and back if you’d like, while the rest of us move on up to the cave,” Wei Wuxian offered. “There’s no danger within the wards, but the woods can be... intimidating.”

“Thank you,” said Lu Meilin, and Jiang Cheng nodded.

Much to Wei Wuxian’s delight, he could hear A-Yu cheerfully chattering about how wonderful Ning-gege was all the way down the path.

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! I hope you enjoyed this chapter, do let me know what you think!



# Chapter 13

## Chapter Notes

You guys are amazing! Thank you so much for all the lovely comments!

Just as a head's up - this chapter includes accounts of what happened to the Wens in the prison camps, and is where the 'implied/referenced sexual assault' tag becomes most relevant - given the situation there are also a couple of references to dead children. There's nothing explicit, but if you'd prefer to avoid these references they start at 'Wei Wuxian knew full well that none of them were in the Burial Mounds' and end at 'Wei Wuxian's fist smashed into the floor.'

Also - as I'm trying to be fairly consistent with my use of Chinese for names and titles, I'm using 'Sishu' to refer to Fourth Uncle.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Wei Wuxian had never asked any of the Wen what had happened to them in the camp at Qiongg Pass. There had never been a need to. He had seen more than enough with his own eyes, and in the beginning he hadn't exactly known any of them well enough for them to see him as a confidant. Wen Ning had been unconscious, after all, and Wen Qing kept her worries to herself when she could. As time wore on and he grew closer to Popo and Sishu and A-Yuan, Wei Wuxian had realised that he really didn't want to know any more than he already did. It was bad enough that people so kind and warm and innocent had suffered. He didn't need to know how.

It had been nearly two years, now, that they had lived in the Burial Mounds, and Wei Wuxian cared deeply about every one of the Wens under his care. He was still closest to Wen Qing and Wen Ning, and Popo and Sishu, and his wonderful little A-Yuan, but there was not a single person in the Burial Mounds he wouldn't count as family.

There wasn't a single person he thought could even slightly deserve spending time in a normal prison – let alone a camp such as the one at Qiongg Pass.

On a logical level, he understood why Lan Qiren and Jin Zixuan wanted to know more. They needed to know the extent of the Jin Clan's crimes, of Wei Wuxian's crimes, and he needed them to know. He needed them to be on his side. He understood the hurry, too – with Lan Xichen missing, Lan Qiren didn't have any time to spare. But logic didn't stop Wei Wuxian's heart from beating fierce and fast against his ribcage as he led them both to sit down in Popo's room with Wen Qing to wait for the first witness to arrive.

"As long as either of you are in here with one of the Wen, I will not be leaving this room," Wei Wuxian said, doing his best to keep his voice polite, but making no pretence that this was

a negotiation. “Wen Qing and I will be here the entire time. If anyone becomes too upset to continue, or wants to leave, they will leave, and you will not follow them.”

“I understand,” said Jin Zixuan, nodding so deeply it was almost a bow, and Lan Qiren curled his lip, but gave a stiff nod of his own.

Wei Wuxian bowed a little, and tried to pretend that his gut was not squirming. “Thank you.”

They had chosen Popo’s room on purpose. Tucked away at the back of the house, it was private and clean and warm, but it also had a large doorway, and several windows. With Lan Qiren and Jin Zixuan’s backs to the far wall, the Wen could sit closer to the door in case they wanted to leave suddenly.

To his dismay, it was Sishu who was first through the door, fear lining the creases of his face. He bowed to the room, offering Wei Wuxian a tight smile, and then he knelt down opposite Lan Qiren and Jin Zixuan.

“What is your name?” Lan Qiren asked, and Sishu inclined his head.

“Wen Chang, though I go mainly by Sishu.”

“What was your role in the war, Wen Chang?”

Sishu’s face tightened. “I played no part in it,” he said, his voice quiet but firm. “I am of Dafan Wen. We all are, or most of us. For over a hundred years our clan devoted itself to healing. It was our custom when we came of age to pledge never to take a life but in self-defence, and then only as a last resort. Those here who cultivate practise medical cultivation – they know the techniques of the sword but rarely wield them. Wen-zongzhu never called upon us to fight. He thought us of little use. I played no part in the war.”

“You did not protest Wen Ruohan’s actions,” said Lan Qiren, and anger coiled in Wei Wuxian’s gut.

“What exactly do you think they could do?” he said sharply, before Sishu could speak, but Wen Qing glared at him and Sishu gave him a small, weary smile.

“It’s okay, Wei-gongzi. It is true we did not protest. As I said, Wen Ruohan thought little of us, and for the sake of our children we tried to stay out of his way. To that end, we had to leave Dafan before the war had even begun.”

“Wen Chao turned living people into puppets,” Wen Qing said tightly. “To try and steal the Yin Iron from Hanguang Jun. He did not succeed, and their consciousness was restored. Lan Wangji was there. He can testify to this.”

Lan Qiren’s eyes narrowed. “Before the burning of Cloud Recesses? Wangji has spoken of it. He did not tell me the village was that of the Wen.”

He probably hadn’t thought it mattered, Wei Wuxian thought. To Lan Zhan, an innocent villager being turned into a puppet was the start and the end of it – it wouldn’t matter their name or their clan. To others, however...

After a moment, Sishu continued speaking. “We settled near Qishan, and we healed the wounded, where we could. We tried to remain out of the way. But our village was raided by the Sunshot Alliance. The soldiers took all the food they could find, and all the wine they could carry. They slept in our homes, and burnt our belongings for warmth, and they grew angry when we hid the women inside.” Sishu paused, his face tightening into something like anger. It looked strange on his calm, friendly face. “Near the beginning of the war, the Wen army found the outpost set up in the village. There was a battle. My – my second son was killed in the fray. He was seventeen.”

Wei Wuxian felt very, very cold. He had no idea Sishu had ever had children, and referring to a second son meant not only had there been a first, but there were likely younger children too.

Wei Wuxian knew full well that none of them were in the Burial Mounds.

“The Sunshot Alliance won,” said Sishu, his eyes glazing over slightly, and his voice hollowing. “Those of us who surrendered were taken prisoner. Moved here and there. My wife died on the road. We were not allowed to bury her. My youngest son was fourteen. He tried to run. He was afraid.” For the first time, Sishu’s voice broke. “He was shot as he fled. Eventually, we were moved to the camp at Qiongqi.”

From there, it got even worse. Wei Wuxian felt his fingers ache as they clenched around Chenqing, as Sishu recounted the conditions of the camp with a hollow detachment that clawed at his heart. He heard details of the back-breaking work Sishu insisted they did their best to complete, details of the starvation, and the beatings, and the sickness that ravaged through the camps. The illnesses that Dafan Wen knew were borne of the cold and the poor conditions, others that were more insidious and inexplicable, sicknesses that brought with them black veins and cracking skin, and always started with the few who returned after being dragged away for experiments.

One of these poor souls, Wei Wuxian discovered, was Sishu’s oldest son. Sishu met Lan Qiren’s gaze unwavering as he described watching his son buck and spasm against the mud, choking for air that wouldn’t come, slumping down as the veins around his neck turned black.

As he described being forced to leave his son where he fell until the day’s work was done. Of the ‘mercy’ the guards then offered as they ordered Sishu to drag the body alone to the back hills, where the rest of the dead lay.

How Sishu had returned on staggering feet, because his family were still within the camp. His mother, two of his nephews, the last of his nieces – Popo, Wen Ning, A-Yuan... and A-Ting.

It was the first time Wei Wuxian had heard anyone use the name of A-Yuan’s older sister aloud. Only a moment later, Sishu spoke of the sickness that had taken her. She had been six years old. She had died with black veins on her neck. Though he clenched his teeth shut and pressed his arm to his mouth, a muffled sob still broke free from Wei Wuxian.

Sishu looked up at him, and somehow the grief on his face made way for a sympathy Wei Wuxian was sure he did not deserve. “Wei-gongzi.”

There was a hollow hush, like the eerie quiet after a bloody battle, and then Lan Qiren said, “Is there anything else you believe the cultivation world should know?”

Sishu met Lan Qiren’s eyes without flinching. “Only that Wei-gongzi is a good man, and does not deserve to be persecuted for our sake.”

“Sishu-”

Wen Qing cut his protest off with another glare, and Wei Wuxian stared down at his toes, doing his best to settle his breathing, to pretend that he didn’t want to run away shrieking and pulling at his hair. Trying to at least postpone the urge to run to A-Yuan and hold him close where he would be safe, the need to keep A-Yuan safe forever and ever.

Nausea struck him in the gut, sudden and sure.

That was a task he’d failed at, once. He hadn’t kept Sizhui safe – he had left him alone and abandoned, if Lan Zhan hadn’t –

“Wei-gongzi,” said Sishu, and Wei Wuxian looked up sharply. The older man was on his feet now, and smiling sadly at him.

“I didn’t know,” he murmured, his voice sticking in his throat. Sishu didn’t ask what he meant, but he nodded slowly.

“It is hard to speak of those we lost. What we once had,” he said carefully. “But it is thanks only to you we are alive to speak of them at all.” With that, Sishu bowed to Lan Qiren and Jin Zixuan, and then squeezed Wei Wuxian’s shoulder, and ducked out of the door.

And then Yingyue came inside, her face white and set as marble, and the nightmare began again.

To begin with, her story was similar to Sishu’s. She too was of Dafan Wen, though unlike the older man she was a cultivator. Her golden core was strong for one who learnt predominantly through healing cultivation, but that could be expected since she learnt alongside Wen Qing as a child. This, Wei Wuxian already knew. He also knew that she had an older sister living in the Burial Mounds who was not a cultivator.

He had not known that once, Yingyue was the third of five sisters.

He didn’t know that their oldest sister had died in childbirth at Qiongqi Pass, that Yingyue had been kept from her side by the chains around her wrists. That the guards declared the baby was born unbreathing, that no one was ever given a chance to try –

That the next day, the *next day*, Yingyue had been called upon to ‘service’ the guards.

The fury that rose in Wei Wuxian’s chest was a whirlwind and he choked on it, his hands trembling, Chenqing shaking –



“Wei Wuxian,” Wen Qing murmured, and he drew a sharp breath, forcing his fingers to unwind, to put Chenqing on the floor in front of him.

His hands still shook.

“It was not every guard,” said Yingyue quietly. “Some were more honourable than that. Some were disinterested. But others... It was... often. Some time after Minli died, we were called to the gate. They sent the men back to work, and then the older women. Some of the married women were lucky enough to be sent away, too. The rest of us... we were introduced to Jin-gongzi.”

Jin Zixuan stiffened, and there was no hiding the horror in his eyes.

“One of the other guards addressed him as Jin Zixun,” said Yingyue, her arms curling around her stomach. “He was young. Average height. We knew he was high in rank – his robes were rich, and he wore the vermilion mark on his forehead. I remember he had heavy eyebrows, close set... a strange thing to remember, perhaps, but I... In any case. He did not speak to us, but to the guards. He... he said it would be a waste to send us all, that if they did there would be no one there to service the guards, or take care of him when he visited. He took twenty women away. My younger sisters were among them. They did not come back. Jin-gongzi did.”

Wei Wuxian’s knuckles screamed as he clenched his fists tighter. He knew that Jin Zixun was scum of the earth, but this – this –

“Why?” Jin Zixuan choked, speaking for the first time since introducing himself. “Why would – he –”

Wei Wuxian’s anger stirred, but Yingyue looked at Jin Zixuan with sympathy in her eyes.

“Jin-gongzi came to see to the progress of Jin-zongzhu’s project. He told the guards so much, and loudly. He always carried a whip, and he often-” She broke off, staring down at her hands. “Every trip he would find me, or one of the other women, and he would... he...” She shuddered, lowering her eyes and wrapped her arms around herself tighter, and everyone in the room heard the words that went unsaid.

Wei Wuxian’s fist smashed into the floor. Yingyue flinched, and Wen Qing grabbed his wrist, but a rage unlike anything he had felt since the awful night he found the camp at Qiongqi himself was consuming him, and that memory did nothing to help.

“I’m going to kill him,” he snarled, his chest burning as he shook with fury. The world before his eyes was stained blood red. “I’m going to tear him apart, I’m going to butcher him! He’ll die wishing I was the one who cast that stupid curse – I *wish* I’d cast the curse! I’ll cast it better, a hundred-fold, he’ll die screaming-”

“Wei Wuxian!” Wen Qing snapped, looking pointedly at Lan Qiren, and Wei Wuxian could see fear in her eyes.

“If this is true, he deserves no less,” said Jin Zixuan quietly. He was deathly pale, and his voice trembled, but it was also sure. “But-”

“*But?!?*”

“But,” Jin Zixuan repeated, meeting Wei Wuxian’s eyes. “If we want to avoid your looking like a deranged, power-hungry mass-murderer the way you did last time, we should go about it a different way. A trial first. Punishment second. I’m not saying you can’t kill him. I am asking you only to wait.”

Wei Wuxian’s teeth clenched, and he looked away. The anger was still hot within him, but Jin Zixuan’s words made sense. He scowled. “Since when did you start being so damn competent?”

Jin Zixuan kept his chin raised. “The lives of my wife and my sons are in danger. I will do whatever it takes to keep them safe.”

That was actually a rather sweet sentiment, but Wei Wuxian was not feeling particularly charitable, so he jerked his chin up in a nod and folded his arms. “Ah. So when you married Shijie some of her common sense started to rub off on you?”

“Wei Wuxian,” warned Wen Qing, and Wei Wuxian let himself slump back against the wall.

“Please, continue your story,” said Lan Qiren stiffly, and Yingyue glanced at Wei Wuxian. He nodded.

Thankfully, Yingyue had little more to say besides an account of Wei Wuxian’s rescue, and an assurance that since moving to the Burial Mounds the Wen had harmed no one.

“And Wei-gongzi... Wei-gongzi is a good man. We know the reputation he has gained, but it is undeserving. He is the most righteous man I have ever met.”

Wei Wuxian blinked, almost as shocked at those words as Lan Qiren seemed to be, but he didn’t have long to process the compliment, because soon Yingyue was gone, and Wen Tong had taken her place, and it all started again.

Everyone who spoke told variations of the same horror story, adding details that could aligned perfectly with each other, showing scars from whips and rods brands – brands in the shape of peonies – and Wei Wuxian’s rage grew fiercer, even as his anguish roared within him. He wanted to fly to Jinlintai, to tear it down brick by brick, to rip apart every guard who had ever abused the prisoners under their control, to tear Jin Guangshan and Jin Zixun limb from limb. He wanted to scream until there was no air left in the world, to throw his fists against the floor like a toddler –

He wanted A-Yuan.

He wanted A-Yuan there, in his arms, he wanted A-Yuan *safe*.

The only thing that stopped him from charging from the room or throwing a fit was that Jin Zixuan looked almost as horrified as he felt, and Lan Qiren’s mouth was a thin line of

displeasure that seemed to be aimed more and more at the tales told than the tellers. A couple of times, Jin Zixuan looked like he might throw up again.

Eventually, it was over.

“That’s everyone,” murmured Wen Ning. “The others would rather not speak of the camps, if possible. And Popo-”

“Popo is with A-Yuan,” said Wei Wuxian tightly, glaring a challenge at Lan Qiren. “No one will speak of the camps with A-Yuan in earshot.”

“Understood,” said Jin Zixuan, and Lan Qiren nodded. “I didn’t... I never thought... My f-Jin-zongzhu always said it didn’t concern me, that I didn’t need to think about...” Slowly, he raised his eyes to meet Wei Wuxian’s, before looking at Wen Qing. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

“This is not what Jin-zongzhu claimed he was doing with the prisoners,” said Lan Qiren, but then he glared at Wei Wuxian. “Why didn’t you tell anyone this?”

For a moment, Wei Wuxian was so surprised at the question he forgot to be angry. Just for a moment. “I did! What do – I did!”

“Technically, all you said at the banquet was that Jin Zixun had mistreated Wen Ning,” said Jin Zixuan quietly. “And then you left, and marched to the Burial Mounds with no official account. If you had spoken of what was going on in Qiongqi Pass, more support could have been offered.”

“And you would have offered it?” Wei Wuxian snapped, but Jin Zixuan didn’t rise to the bait.

“Hanguang Jun would have. I imagine Zewu-Jun would too, maybe even Nie-zongzhu. With their backing, Jiang Cheng could have offered support too.”

Wei Wuxian gave a bitter laugh. “And who would have listened to me over Jin-zongzhu? I practise dirty tricks, remember? I’m a thorn in the side of the orthodox.”

“In this case, there was fault on many sides, Wei Wuxian,” said Lan Qiren, an unreadable expression on his face. “Now, what matters is that we fix it.”

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Wei Ying had been gone for hours, and Lan Wangji’s worry grew heavier with every moment that passed. Part of him was concerned about the way things were going in the Wen’s little house, and whether Shufu was any closer to seeing Wei Ying’s perspective, but for the most part he was fearful for his brother. Wei Ying said that Jin Guangyao was unlikely to hurt Xichen, and logically it seemed to be a valid assumption, given the story they had been told, but it still meant that Wangji’s xiongzhong was at the mercy of a murderer.

It still meant his xiongzhong was missing.

Sitting still in the Demon Subdue Palace was growing more difficult by the minute, but Wangji knew that as much as he wanted to, setting out alone to look for Xiongzhong would not be the most wise option, so he forced himself to stay.

Of the Wen, only Popo and A-Yuan were in the Demon Subdue Palace with them. Lan Wangji wasn't entirely sure why they remained, but a part of it warmed him. He knew Wei Ying would not leave them there if he did not trust that Wangji and the others would pose no threat.

For a while, A-Yuan had played with A-Yu, but as time wore on he had withdrawn into his Popo's lap, and no amount of coaxing, pouting, or pleading from the other toddler seemed to have an effect. A-Yu had sulked back into the lap of his own grandmother, playing with her hair with his lower lip sticking out as Lu Meilin spoke quietly with Jingyi, Sizhui, and Zizhen. Though he sat beside them, Lan Wangji didn't participate in the conversation. There was too much on his mind. There was nothing to say.

A few paces away, Jiang Wanyin, Jiang Yanli and Jinling were sitting in a small circle, talking amongst themselves. The conversations were all quiet, almost muted.

It seemed Lan Wangji and A-Yuan were not the only ones growing concerned.

Eventually, A-Yuan began to fidget, clutching his blue rabbit closer to his chest and looking anxiously at Jinling, and then at the door.

"Popo," he said, tugging on her sleeve. "Popo, A-Yuan go and get Xian-gege now? Please?"

"No, A-Yuan," she said gently. "A-Yuan must be patient and wait."

The boy's lower lip wobbled, and his eyes filled with tears as they fixed once more on Jinling. Jinling caught his eye and smiled, but A-Yuan cringed back into his grandmother's lap, and the older boy's face crumpled. He hung his head, and Jiang Yanli rubbed his arm, murmuring something to him and then putting the baby into the teenager's arms. Jinling stiffened, staring down at Rulan with wide eyes, but a little of the tension eased from his shoulders.

A-Yuan watched Jinling intently. As the teenager began speaking to his mother once more, A-Yuan put a tentative toe on the ground, before drawing his leg back into Popo's lap. When nothing happened, he tumbled out of Popo's lap, and ran. For a moment, Lan Wangji thought he was making for the door to try and find Wei Ying, but instead he made a beeline for Lan Wangji himself, throwing himself over his knees and looking plaintively up at him.

"Rich-gege, will *you* go and find Xian-gege? Please?"

"Not yet," said Lan Wangji, making his voice as gentle as it could. "But Xian-gege is safe. Xian-gege is coming back."

A-Yuan stared at him intently. "Promise?"

"I promise."

The child gave a deep, shuddering sigh, and then clambered into Lan Wangji's lap, snuggling up into his arms. Across from him, A-Yu's mouth dropped open.

“A-Yuan!” he gasped, racing over as fast as he could and tugging at the other boy’s arm. He was clearly trying to whisper, though he was bad at it. His voice was almost as loud as normal. “A-Yuan that’s Hanguang Jun, you, you have to be best behaviour with Hanguang Jun-”

“No, no, no!” A-Yuan yelped, pulling his arm away from A-Yu and clinging to Lan Wangji. It seemed the right thing to do to wrap an arm around the boy to support him, so Lan Wangji did. “Rich-gege!”

“It’s alright,” said Lan Wangji, nodding at A-Yu. “A-Yuan is fine.”

A-Yu’s little eyes widened until they had almost doubled in size, and he gave a tentative nod. “Oh... okay, Hanguang Jun.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Lan Wangji noticed Sizhui watching, a small smile on his face. When he caught Wangji’s eye, the boy’s smile grew stronger.

“It’s strange,” he murmured, “like looking at a memory from the outside.”

Lan Wangji looked down at A-Yuan, his stomach fluttering strangely. In another life, this boy had been his, had grown into the young man beside him in Wangji’s care. Now, he was again but the son of a dear friend, and he wasn’t Lan Wangji’s at all. He never had been, and Lan Wangji was grateful beyond all thought that Wei Ying was here, and alive, and whole.

Still, though, he couldn’t quite shake the feeling of loss, which did not make sense, because he could not lose that which he had never had. If anything, he had gained – now he had Sizhui beside him, and with any luck Wei Ying would still (inexplicably) wish for his company at times when all was said and done, and he would be in A-Yuan’s life a little, too. He shouldn’t feel like he lost anything.

But he did.

And he didn’t understand it.

“A-Yuan?” said Sizhui gently, snapping Lan Wangji out of his reverie. The little boy shifted against his chest to look up at Sizhui, clinging just a little tighter to Wangji’s robes. Sizhui smiled, nodding at the toy rabbit. “Have you given them a name yet?”

Studying Sizhui with guarded eyes, A-Yuan shook his head, clinging tighter to the little rabbit. Lan Wangji wondered what the boy saw when he looked up at his older self, if he thought Sizhui looked familiar. Still smiling softly, Sizhui reached into his sleeve and pulled out his own, faded rabbit, showing it to A-Yuan, whose eyes widened.

“This one is mine,” Sizhui said softly. “His name is Tuzi. Your Rich-gege gave him to me when I was very small.” He paused, leaning a little closer to whisper, “Rich-gege only gives rabbits to his favourites.”

A-Yuan looked up at Lan Wangji, who considered this for a moment, and then nodded. It was accurate. Tilting his head slightly, A-Yuan glanced back at Sizhui. “You’re Rich-gege’s

favourite?”

Smiling, Sizhui nodded. “Not as much as you.”

Lan Wangji frowned slightly, uneasy with the idea of ranking his affection, but the words made A-Yuan smile a little. After a moment, the little boy said, “Luobo. I want to call my bunny Luobo.” He looked up at Lan Wangji expectantly, and Wangji nodded. Radish was an appropriate name for a rabbit. Sizhui beamed.

“That’s a good name,” he said, nodding again. “Perhaps Tuzi and Luobo can be friends?”

A-Yuan considered this for a moment, and then nodded. “Luobo thinks that would be nice.”

“Tuzi thinks so, too.” Gently, Sizhui made his own rabbit hop over his knees, and then onto A-Yuan’s. His movements were small and steady, never too fast or too sharp, as he made the rabbit move the same way a living one would. He made it hop up to A-Yuan’s newer, bluer bunny and nuzzle its nose, and then he had it hop back down A-Yuan’s legs and onto his own. Slowly, A-Yuan took Luobo away from his chest, copying the hopping motion clumsily.

Then, he looked up at Lan Wangji again. “Rich-gege, Luobo wants to go and find Xian-gege.”

“Tuzi does too,” said Sizhui, looking down at his own rabbit and making it nod. “Tuzi is worried about Xian-gege. But it’s okay. Xian-gege is coming back.”

A-Yuan’s lower lip stuck out and he sniffed, but there weren’t tears in his eyes this time. “Luobo’s still scared.”

“Then why don’t you tell him that Xian-gege’s coming back? That might help,” suggested Sizhui, looking back at his own rabbit. “Tuzi, Xian-gege is coming back. We just have to wait.”

A-Yuan swallowed, looking again up at Lan Wangji, who nodded.

“Xian-gege is coming back,” A-Yuan mumbled to his rabbit. He didn’t sound particularly convinced, and he squeezed the toy close to his chest again, but he did nod a little. “We just have to wait.”

Lan Wangji wasn’t sure where the instinct to draw the toddler closer to him came from, but putting his arm around A-Yuan earlier hadn’t seemed to hurt, so he let his grip tighten just a little. With a soft sigh, A-Yuan snuggled against him, letting go of Wangji’s robes to cuddle his arm instead, and Wangji felt something oddly warm in his stomach.

Sizhui smiled, warm and open and gentle, and Lan Wangji was reminded of Xichen so suddenly and sharply that it hurt.

A few minutes later, the door to the Demon Subdue Palace finally opened, and A-Yuan leapt from Lan Wangji’s lap with a cry. “*Xian-gege!*”

Wei Ying stepped inside, and a chill ran down Lan Wangji's spine. There was something wrong – at first, Wei Ying's face was alarmingly blank, but then he saw A-Yuan running towards him, and his expression crumpled into what looked like pain. Lan Wangji rose, vaguely aware of Jiang Wanyin and Popo doing the same, but Wei Ying ignored them, snatching A-Yuan from the floor and clutching him close. For a moment, Wei Ying pressed his face into the little boy's neck, when he pulled away his eyes were tightly closed, and there were tears on his cheeks.

"A-Yuan," he murmured, holding the boy so tightly Lan Wangji was a little worried A-Yuan would be crushed. But A-Yuan just wrapped his little limbs around Wei Ying, and Wei Ying shuddered. "A-Yuan..."

Fear tightened in Wangji's heart, but before he could think what to do, Popo had moved over to Wei Ying's side, and she put a hand on his arm.

"Wei-gongzi," she said gently, "are you alright?"

Wei Ying flinched slightly, staring at her. "Why does everyone keep asking *me* that? I –"

Popo's face crinkled into a sad smile. "Wei-gongzi, for us it has been two years since such things happened. To hear of it all in one sitting cannot have been easy for you." She paused, and her smile became surer and fonder. "You always take things straight to the heart, Wei-gongzi, but you are the reason we are safe today. You are the reason A-Yuan is here. Remember that."

A-Yuan pulled back slightly, putting one of his little hands on Wei Ying's cheek. "Xian-gege, Xian-gege, what's wrong?" he asked plaintively, his eyes flickering fearfully towards Jin Zixuan and Lan Qiren, who had come in behind Wei Ying.

Wei Ying pulled a smile onto his face, but it looked pained. "Nothing, A-Yuan. Nothing's wrong. Everything's okay now. The peacock was just telling me a sad story."

"A-Xian," Jiang Yanli said sternly, though Jin Zixuan simply rolled his eyes, looking far too pale and not nearly offended enough.

"Peacock? What peacock?" A-Yuan asked, peering around at the floor as though expecting a bird to prance through the door.

"Hey, Wei Wuxian," said Jiang Wanyin sharply, before anyone could answer him. "That reminds me – you never answered A-Jie's question!"

Wei Ying blinked, glancing at his brother. "What question?"

Jiang Wanyin scowled. "Why didn't you ever tell us you have a son?"

At once, Wei Ying stiffened, his eyes widening and his arms tightening around A-Yuan. "I – Jiang *Cheng* –"

"What?" Jiang Wanyin demanded. "It's a fair question."

“Because I don’t!” Wei Ying snapped, an urgent fear in his eyes as he looked at Popo, his voice softening at once. “I know I’m not, Popo, I know!”

Lan Wangji frowned. “You told me you were his father.”

Wei Ying turned to him, an expression on his face that flickered between anxiety, exasperation, and disbelief. “I told you I *birthed* him, Lan Zhan, please tell me you didn’t take that literally.”

Wangji felt his own frown deepen. Of course he had never believed that Wei Ying *physically* birthed him, but he thought that given the context it was a fair assumption that Wei Ying had claimed the child. “Not literally.”

Wei Ying shook his head, looking anxiously at Popo, but his hand was running over A-Yuan’s hair, and the little boy was clinging to him, and he certainly looked like a father. “Popo, I’m sorry, I – I know he’s not – not mine, I know that –”

“Wei-gongzi,” said Popo gently, and Wei Ying fell silent. The old woman looked at A-Yuan, smiling sadly. “A-Yuan, you remember what we told you about your parents?”

A-Yuan nodded. He looked a little sad, but it was clear that this was an old grief, and a faraway one. “Fuqin had to go away before I was born,” he recited. “And Muqin had to go away a little bit after. When I was just still a baby.”

“That’s right,” said Popo. “But some people are very lucky, A-Yuan – some people get more than two parents. If it is alright with you, I think Xian-gege would like to be your A-Die.”

Wei Ying became still as stone, and A-Yuan’s little brow creased with worry, his hands tightening around Wei Ying’s robes. “Does, does that mean he has to go away too?” He asked, his voice high with a fear that cut into Lan Wangji’s heart like a razor. Even Lan Qiren looked disturbed, his face pulled into a frown that Wangji knew meant concern rather than disapproval.

“No, my darling,” murmured Popo, stroking A-Yuan’s cheek. “No, sweet boy. An A-Die is there to protect you and care for you and help you grow up big and strong. And if you want him, I know Xian-Gege will do everything he can to stay.”

“He, he stays with A-Yuan?” A-Yuan asked uncertainly.

Popo looked meaningfully at Wei Ying, but his eyes were wide and confused and he shook his head. “I don’t – I don’t understand-”

A-Yuan gave a little gasp of a sob, his eyes filling with tears, and he clutched at Wei Ying’s hair. “Xian-gege, Xian-gege won’t stay with A-Yuan?”

“No,” choked Wei Ying, holding the little boy closer, his face cracked open with pain. “No, that’s not what I meant, it’s okay, I’m here, I – I – Popo?”

“Wei-gongzi,” the old woman said, her voice still so gentle. “You have been acting as A-Yuan’s father for a year now. Probably longer. Save for A-Chang, all of my children are gone.



My husband is gone, and my brothers, and most of my grandchildren. When A-Yuan's mother passed away, I believed he would be an orphan all his life, that there was no way the fates could align to give him the family he deserved. I did not expect to gain – I did not expect this. But A-Yuan deserves to be happy, and he deserves a father. There is no one I would trust with him over you, Wei-gongzi."

Lan Wangji was not about to cry. His eyes were itching, was all. He blinked – slowly, so as not to give anyone the wrong impression – and watched Wei Ying carefully. The other man was crying freely, tears streaming down his cheeks, and Wangji wanted to wipe them away –

He stopped that thought in its tracks. No matter what Sizhui said, what he thought, it was unlikely that Wei Ying –

It did not matter.

It wasn't the right time.

*Will it ever be?*

"Popo," Wei Ying whispered, "I – the others have, have lost so much, and I – I –"

"A-Yuan is not a prize to be given over to whoever lost the most," said Wen Qing sharply, though there was a soft smile on her face. Lan Wangji had not noticed her coming inside, but there she was, standing by Wei Ying's shoulder. "If A-Yuan is to have a father – as he deserves to – none of us would rather it was anyone but you."

"Wei-gongzi," said Popo, taking his hand. "I am sorry for putting you on the spot. This, perhaps, is a conversation we ought to have had a long time ago, and most likely in private." Silently, Lan Wangji couldn't help but agree with that. "But with everything that is going on, I... Well. It seems likely we may not be here for very much longer. It seemed important that you know that A-Yuan belongs as much with you as he does with us."

Wei Ying closed his eyes, shuddering, but then he nodded. A-Yuan's little hand wiped at the tears on his cheeks, a little anxiously.

"Xian-gege?"

Wei Ying opened his eyes and smiled bravely, jogging the boy on his hip. "Well, it's your choice, A-Yuan," he said, and though he was clearly trying to make his voice sound cheerful it sounded strangled in Wangji's ears. "Do you want to be my son? Do you want me to be your A-Die?"

A-Yuan hesitated, twining his fingers around Wei Ying's red ribbon. "You... you won't go away? Being A-Die won't mean you have to go?"

"No," Wei Ying promised brokenly. "No, I – I'll do everything I can not to go. To stay with A-Yuan. Okay?"

Lan Wangji glanced down at Sizhui, who was watching the exchange with tears on his cheeks and a wide smile. Following an instinct he didn't know he had, Lan Wangji reached down

and stroked the boy's hair. Sizhui glanced up, wiping his cheek with his sleeve and beaming at Lan Wangji. He didn't look upset that Wei Ying was promising the younger versions of himself things that Sizhui himself had been deprived of, that Wei Ying was promising to stay now, when he hadn't then. Instead, Sizhui just looked happy. A selflessness like that... It brought a lump to Wangji's throat.

His son was so much like Xiongzhong.

"Okay," A-Yuan said hesitantly. "Okay, A-Die?"

Wei Ying let out a garbled mix of a laugh and a sob, and he nodded, kissing the toddler's forehead. "If you're sure that's what you want," he said.

"A-Die!" A-Yuan cried happily, his face suddenly bright with a smile, and he flung himself against Wei Ying's chest, nestling against his neck. "A-Die."

A warm hand squeezed Lan Wangji's, and he glanced down in time to see Sizhui starting to let go. Swallowing the lump in his throat, Wangji wound his fingers around Sizhui's, and squeezed back. With another smile, Sizhui leant against his legs for a moment. He kept a hold of Lan Wangji's hand.

## Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed that chapter! Please do let me know what you thought, I am absolutely loving all of your wonderful comments!

# Chapter 14

## Chapter Notes

Thank you again for all the lovely comments, honestly your response to this story makes me so happy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Eventually, Wei Ying glanced at his siblings, and Lan Wangji, and Jin Zixuan, his face growing a little red. He shifted A-Yuan on his hip slightly, but made no move to put him down. “Sorry about that,” he said, clearly attempting to make his voice cavalier again. It did not work. “Anyway, where were we? Figuring out what to do with our Lans, right?”

“In terms of Jingyi, I believe the matter is solved,” said Lu Meilin smoothly, and Wangji blinked down at her.

“Solved?” repeated Shufu, clearly disbelieving.

“Yes,” she said. “I will inform my husband at once that he had an affair.”

Lan Wangji couldn’t help it.

His mouth fell open.

By the door, his uncle’s eyes were widening to an alarming degree.

“For those of you who are unaware, my husband’s primary talent is in the forging of spiritual weapons. To that end, he spends a month of each year in Meishan with the Yu clan, which is where he is now. Nineteen years ago, during... hm, we shall say a festival, he mistakenly drank some wine, and had a dalliance with a young woman also visiting Meishan. Come morning they both felt terrible, for she was a fine woman when not under the influence of alcohol, and they swore to never see each other again. When he got back to Cloud Recess, Liqin was simply beside himself with guilt, and admitted what had happened to me that very night. I was devastated of course, but after a little time our relationship recovered, and our marriage has never been stronger. However, Liqin had no idea that the chance encounter had left the woman pregnant, and she was too ashamed to break their oath and seek him out. She built a life with her son most honourably, working as... as a seamstress, yes, that’s respectable, and teaching her son cultivation. Though she never told him of his father’s identity, she kept a letter addressed to Liqin in a chest, in case anything ever happened to her. Tragically, a year or so ago she passed away, and young Jingyi found the letter and brought it to Liqin while he was in Meishan. At once Liqin sent word, and we decided to take in the boy and give him his rightful name of Lan, taking it as a sign from the heavens that he should join our family, as he shares a courtesy name with our youngest grandson. Though, of course, he

will need a new birth name, and for the sake of ease we may well have to pick another courtesy name for A-Yu – but he is young enough that it is easily changed.”

Vaguely, Lan Wangji was aware that his mouth was still hanging open. Across the room, his uncle had turned a very strange shade of grey, but Lu Meilin simply raised her eyebrows at him.

“It would explain everything – why he looks so much like his father and A-Yu, how he knows ‘Yu’-gongzi over there.” She nodded towards Jinling.

When Lan Qiren had recovered enough to speak, his voice was so tight Lan Wangji thought it might break. “You want to tell the world that he’s the bastard son of your husband?”

Lu Meilin frowned. “Of course. He can’t be *my* bastard child. I would’ve had to hide the pregnancy, and would’ve had no reason to. It would hardly explain anything.”

“That –” Lan Qiren cut himself off sharply, seemingly suddenly aware of his own lack of control. “Meilin.”

“Qiren,” she replied, mirroring his tone.

Out of the corner of his eye, Lan Wangji caught sight of Wei Ying. It looked like he was enjoying this far too much.

“But wouldn’t that bring shame on Yeye?” asked Jingyi worriedly. “We would lose face.”

“I would rather lose face than lose a grandson,” said Lu Meilin, but then she winced slightly, her eyes darting towards Popo. The older woman gave her a small smile, and Meilin bowed her head in apology.

“I’ll leave you to your business, Wei-gongzi,” said Popo softly, bowing to the room and then backing out of the cave.

Smiling sadly, Lu Meilin turned back to Jingyi, and squeezing his wrist. “It would be an old shame, newly revealed but long past. People will get over it. Besides, men claim bastard children all the time.”

“Not in Gusu Lan,” grit out Lan Qiren.

“Do you have a better idea? One that will explain why these two boys are going to grow up to look identical?”

“Do you intend to ask Liqin his permission for this?” By now, Lan Qiren’s voice was growing higher in pitch every time he spoke, and worry twisted in Wangji’s chest, not tempered at all by the fact that Wei Ying had his hand over his mouth as though he was trying not to laugh.

“Of course,” said Lu Meilin. “But tell me, Qiren, do you honestly think Liqin would hesitate for a second, knowing it is the safest way to ensure our grandson has a safe and irrefutable place in our family and our clan?”

Lan Liqin would not hesitate, and Wangji knew it. His uncle's cousin was an honourable man, and most often followed the rules to the letter, but he viewed the needs of his family as above those of his honour or his clan, and he always had. Among Wangji's earliest memories was hiding in his room while Lan Liqin and Lan Qiren argued in the hall, the former protesting that A-Zhan was clearly upset and needed more time with his mother, the rules be damned, while the latter had defended the principles of the clan until neither man had the breath left to argue further. In the end, Lan Qiren had won out, but Wangji still remembered Lan Liqin's bitter smile, his quiet promise to try again when he returned from his next trip to Meishan. Sometimes, Wangji wondered what would have happened if Lan Liqin had the chance to try again – by the end of his next trip to Meishan, Lan Wangji's mother was dead.

Yes. If there was any elder among Gusu Lan who would surrender his own honour for the safety of his grandson without so much as a second thought, it was Lan Liqin.

“How, then, do you expect to explain the events of this morning?” demanded Lan Qiren.

Lu Meilin pursed her lips, nodding slowly. “I... that will be more difficult. It would be best if it was not known that Jingyi was there.”

“Yet Jin Zixun saw him carrying A-Yu this morning. And that is not all. How do you expect to explain that these young men sprouted out of the earth and interrupted the ambush?”

“We hadn't got there yet,” said Wei Ying defensively.

“Do not forget, Jin Zixun is not the only witness. There were dozens of cultivators atop the hill, and I do not doubt they will give a testament – those who survived, at least,” said Lan Qiren, fixing a gaze of steel on Wen Ning.

Wei Ying's eyes flashed.

“Shufu,” Lan Wangji said, drawing the attention of his uncle and Wei Ying at once. “They were ambushed. They had a right to defend themselves.”

Lan Qiren looked as though he wanted to disagree, his lip curled in a look of disapproval that made Wangji feel smaller than A-Yuan.

“Well...” said Jiang Yanli, a little unexpectedly. Her brow was furrowed in thought, and her cheeks flushed slightly as everyone's attention turned to her, but she kept her voice steady. “Since we know Su She was playing a dizi on the other side of the mountain, what if we say that the boys saw him? They saw him play, and were confused and alarmed, but when they saw the situation at hand, they understood and intervened. If A-Ling and Ouyang-gongzi are to be cousins of Yunmeng Jiang and of A-Xian, their intervention makes sense, as would their quick understanding of what it was Su She was doing. They are all young – we could say they were on a night hunt, or returning from one, perhaps.”

Lan Qiren bowed his head towards her, speaking stiffly – though a little more respectfully. “While that plan is not without merit, Jin-furen, it fails to explain how A-Yu was taken from Cloud Recess, and how he came to be under the care of Lan Jingyi.”

There was a moment of silence, and Lu Meilin's eyes narrowed in thought. "Unless... Unless he never was. My son and daughter-in-law are known to be night-hunting. If they returned earlier than anticipated, but arrived in Gusu after curfew, they may have taken a room in an inn in Caiyi. It is not unheard of. But if something had gone wrong on the night hunt, and Haoran was injured or confused, then it is possible he would wake in the night and fear for his son. People have been known to see danger where it isn't after a scare, after all. If, say, Haoran had taken a blow to the head, or been affected by residual resentful energy, he could have fled in his confusion. By the time morning came and his sense returned he had reached such a distance that it seemed to make more sense to push onto Lanling, since A-Yu was tired and hungry. On the way however, he came upon the mess in Qiongqi Pass, and – and–"

"And decided that rather than waiting safely on the cliff with the other disciples he would take his son down to where the Yiling Patriarch and the Ghost General were standing?" asked Lan Qiren, his voice skirting close to scornful. Lan Wangji conceded that it seemed unlikely that Haoran would endanger his child in such a way, but Lu Meilin's lips twisted, and she shook her head.

"Yes – if no one was fighting, I think Haoran would have gone down. He's always been keen to think for himself, and to see each side of a story before he makes judgement." She paused, and glanced at Lan Wangji, offering him a fond smile. "Besides, Haoran has always been fond of his cousin, and he knows that Wangji is good friends with Wei-gongzi. I believe if he had been there, he would have felt it important to at least investigate what was going on. With the knowledge of Su She's treachery, he would likely have ensured his son's safety, and assisted Jin-gongzi and Wei-gongzi on their mission to Jinlintai. Haoran and Liling are in Kuizhou now, that isn't far from here. It would not take long to fetch them."

Lan Wangji considered this carefully, and then nodded, glancing at his uncle. "It seems credible."

Lan Qiren huffed. "Perhaps. But the elders who came today must be told the truth."

"Why?" asked Wei Wuxian, his face suddenly clouding over. "The more people know, the greater the risk."

"The story will not be credible to them. They know Lan Haoran and they know that he is not Lan Jingyi. They will need to be told the truth."

"They will need to swear to secrecy before they do," said Wei Ying stubbornly. "This is non-negotiable."

"Understood," said Lu Meilin.

After a long moment, Lan Qiren gave a sharp nod. "Very well. Then what is being said about 'Lan Sizhui?' I assume he will be taking the persona of another cousin Yu or Wei."

Lan Wangji's gut twisted, disappointment and discomfort tangling uncomfortably within him. He knew that Shufu knew full well they hadn't discussed Sizhui's identity yet – by 'assuming' he was saying that he did not think the boy should be a Lan. From the way Sizhui bit down on his lip and ducked his eyes, he understood this too.

“Well,” Wei Ying began, but Lan Wangji couldn’t help himself.

“No,” he said.

His uncle frowned. “Wangji?”

“No,” Lan Wangji said again, meeting Lan Qiren’s sharp stare without flinching. “He is my son. He is a Lan.”

Lan Qiren’s jaw tightened. “You met the boy today, Wangji. He is not your son.”

“Hanguang Jun,” Sizhui began, but Wangji squeezed his hand and cut over him.

“He was raised by me. He knows me as a father. I am his father, and he is my son, and he should be a Lan.”

Something flickered in Lan Qiren’s eyes, something that might be sadness or sympathy, but passed too briefly to really be seen. A familiar weariness came over his face, the expression his uncle took when he thought someone was being foolish, and he was disappointed at even having to explain that to them. Wangji’s grip on Sizhui’s hand tightened.

“Wangji,” said Lan Qiren. “You cannot claim him as your son to the world – not if you want to keep this ‘time travel’ business a secret.”

“I understand,” said Lan Wangji. “But he is a Lan.”

“And where do you think he came from, then? Liqin may be willing to squander his reputation by a false claim to a bastard, but I certainly will not, and I will not stand for you sully the reputation of the dead in such a way, either,” he said sharply. “So who would you ask to throw away their reputation and their honour for this boy?”

Lan Wangji had no answer. A small part of him had wondered about claiming Sizhui as his brother, but Qingheng Jun had never left seclusion long enough to father another child, and there would be no logical reason why a third child of his mother would be hidden from the world.

“Hanguang Jun,” Sizhui murmured, squeezing his hand and looking up at him with a sad smile. “It’s okay. I – I understand.”

“It’s not okay!” Jingyi blurted out, looking desperately between Sizhui and Lan Qiren. “Lan-xiansheng, Sizhui’s the best Lan of our whole generation! He’s smart and he’s strong and he’s sensible enough that they’ve been putting him in charge of older disciples on night hunts since he was sixteen! He follows the rules better than any of us, he – he’s –”

“Jingyi,” Sizhui said gently, nudging his friend’s knee with his own. “It’s *okay*.”

“It is not!” Jingyi looked at Wangji, and then at his grandmother, his eyes wide and beseeching. “Nainai – Nainai he’s my shidi. And he’s already had to give up his name and his family and his home once – if anyone shouldn’t have to do it again it’s Sizhui.”

“Well then,” said Lu Meilin. “If no one has an objection to it, there’s a simple enough solution. My husband’s paramour had twins.”

That was not entirely unacceptable, Wangji supposed. Sizhui would be a Lan by blood, in the eyes of the world at least, and he would have every right to his ribbon and his clan. But he would be a cousin, and somehow that seemed so distant. Still, Wangji couldn’t think of anything better himself, so he glanced at the two younger Lans.

Lan Jingyi looked thrilled at the prospect, but Sizhui looked uncertain. “But... would Liqinqianbei... Jingyi is his grandson, but I...”

“You are his grandson’s shidi,” said Lu Meilin. “And you are the son of his cousin. He will not object.”

Still, Sizhui hesitated, twisting a hand in his sleeves. His other hand shifted, holding just a little tighter to Wangji’s. “You’re... you’re sure he wouldn’t mind? That you wouldn’t mind? I don’t, I don’t want to intrude on your family.”

“One cannot intrude into a family one belongs to already,” said Lu Meilin firmly, and Lan Wangji’s considerable affection for her swelled further. “I am sure.”

Sizhui glanced at Jingyi, who was practically bobbing with anticipation, excitement and worry at war on his face. For a Lan, he really was very expressive. A small smile tugged at Sizhui’s lips, and he nudged Jingyi’s knee. “Brothers? Twins?”

“Works for me,” said Jingyi, grinning, and Sizhui glanced at Lan Wangji, an open question in his eyes. Wangji nodded, and Sizhui smiled again, rising to bow to Lu Meilin.

“I would like that, thank you.”

“I am glad,” she said, smiling. “In truth, it is likely that you can keep both of your names – Yuan is not a rare name, and I doubt few will look twice at you and Wen Yuan for some time. But it would be best if you ‘reach us’ for the first time in a week or so – if you arrive at the same time A-Yu disappeared it would be suspicious.” She paused, and her face grew grave. “Perhaps it would be best if, once you leave the Burial Mounds, you hide your ribbons for a time. Just until see Liqin, and he claims you.”

Lan Wangji looked sharply at the two boys, but they nodded solemnly, neither looking surprised or overly upset by this idea. If anything, Sizhui looked relieved.

“So,” said Jiang Wanyin, clearing his throat. “Now that’s settled, what do we do next?”

“I think,” said Wen Qing sternly, “that these four should go and get some sleep.”

“To be honest, I’m too tired to argue,” said Jingyi, stifling a yawn, and Sizhui and Zizhen both nodded. Jinling frowned as though he might protest, but Jiang Yanli put a hand on his arm.

“Of course,” she murmured, smiling sadly at her older son and stroking back his hair. “You must be exhausted.”



“You can sleep in the back,” Wei Ying said, nodding at the place where the boys had changed clothes. “It’s always warm enough in there to make up for our blankets being full of holes.”

“The blankets we left out are the good ones,” said Wen Ning earnestly. “They have much less holes.”

With mumbled goodnight and half-stifled yawns, the four juniors rose and bowed, and Lu Meilin got to her feet too, bringing first Jingyi and then Sizhui into a firm hug. “I will see you in the morning,” she said, and the four boys bowed, making their way through the curtain and into the back room.

Lan Qiren sighed heavily. “It is late. We shall return to Yiling, and inform the elders of what has transpired. I will send someone to fetch Haoran and Liling, and send word to Jinlintai to explain that matters are unrelated to Jin Zixuan’s absence but by coincidence. We will return in the morning to discuss matters further.”

“Save those who came with us and Jingyi’s parents, none shall here a word of this from us,” Lu Meilin added, nodding at Wei Ying.

“Thank you,” Wei Ying said, bowing as low as he could with A-Yuan still on his hip.

“Shufu,” Wangji said, and his throat felt like paper. “Xiongzhang...”

Lan Qiren stared at him for a long moment, his eyes narrowing. “You intend to stay here tonight.”

Wangji nodded, but his heart twisted. “But Xiongzhang-”

“With any luck, Lan Guiren and Lan Mingyu have already found him,” said Lan Qiren. “We have little reason to believe he is in danger. Xichen is fully capable of taking care of himself.”

Wangji could hear the worry behind his uncle’s words, but from the disdainful curl of Wei Ying’s lips and the surprise on the face of the two Jiangs, Lan Wangji knew he was in the minority. But Lan Guiren and Lan Mingyu were among the elders Wangji trusted the most, and he knew they would stop at nothing to find Xichen, so he rose and bowed.

“Thank you, Shufu.”

Lan Qiren nodded, rising to his feet, and everyone else rose too, though Jin Zixuan tried whisper to his wife to remain seated.

“Farewell,” said Lan Qiren stiffly.

“We shall see you tomorrow,” Lu Meilin promised, smiling warmly at Jingyi, Sizhui and Wangji. In her arms, A-Yu yawned, and then frowned.

“We’re going?”

“Yes, sweetheart,” said Lu Meilin, kissing his forehead. “It is time you got to bed.”

“Oh... Is A-Yuan coming too?”

Lan Wangji glanced towards Wei Ying, concerned that A-Yuan might be upset by the notion of going anywhere, but the younger boy had fallen asleep, his head on Wei Ying's shoulder.

“No, not today. A-Yuan is staying here with his A-Die.”

A-Yu wilted for a second, before gasping excitedly. “Can Ning-gege come?”

Wei Ying laughed as Lan Qiren's jaw clenched. Wangji frowned at the noise, but A-Yuan just stirred a little, snuffling closer to his father.

“Ning-gege is staying here tonight, but we can walk you to the gate,” Wei Ying said, his eyes flickering to Lan Qiren for a moment. Then, he looked down at A-Yuan, and his face softened. “A-Yuan?” He murmured, and the boy gave a snuffling little moan. “I'm going to take A-Yu and his Nainai to the gate. I'll only be a minute. Do you want to come, or do you want to stay with Rich-gege?”

A-Yuan's face crinkled into a frown, his eyes still closed, and his little mumbles clearly came from a place of half-sleep. “Just... just going for a minute?”

Wei Ying nodded, kissing the boy's nose. “I'll be back before you know it. You want to stay with Lan Zhan?”

To Wangji's utter shock, A-Yuan nodded, reaching out with a little arm even with his eyes still closed. Wei Ying smiled, and stole Wangji's breath away.

“You don't mind, do you Lan Zhan?” He asked, almost sheepishly. “I don't want him to get cold.”

“I don't mind,” Wangji said at once, and Wei Ying's smile grew stronger again. Surprisingly gently, he eased A-Yuan into Wangji's arms, and the boy shifted, tucking his head against Lan Wangji's neck and clinging to his robes like a little monkey.

“Lan Zhan,” Wei Ying said, but when Wangji met his eyes he just smiled, shaking his head and stepping back. “Thank you. Very well, Lan-laoshi, Lu-qianbei, if you'd like to come this way.”

Lan Qiren nodded stiffly, staring at Wangji. “We will speak tomorrow.”

“Yes, Shufu,” Lan Wangji said, and then his uncle turned, and was gone. Lu Meilin in left with more of a smile, and A-Yu gave a sleepy wave. Wei Ying, Wen Ning and Wen Qing followed them out, and Lan Wangji sat down, shifting A-Yuan so that he might be more comfortable.

“There's still so much more to figure out,” Jiang Wanyin breathed, sinking to the ground himself. “This... this mess is just...”

“Very big,” his sister supplied, settling next to him.

That, Wangji thought, was an understatement.

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The exhaustion that consumed him was stranger than any weariness Sizhui had ever imagined. Emotionally, he felt utterly drained, and over the last hour it had become harder and harder to stifle his yawns, and his eyes ached from stay open. His limbs felt heavy and clumsy, and even as he sat down and pulled the blankets Wen Ning had set out over himself.

But his golden core was still buzzing, his spiritual energy still humming strongly through him. If he meditated on it, it drew the weariness from his limbs, strengthening them, but when he stopped, he felt heavier than ever. He yearned to sleep, but a little part of him was afraid that his core wouldn't let him, that the overactive energy would keep him awake all night. From the way that the others slowly and clumsily settled around him, he guessed that they were feeling the same.

Of course, there were also a million things on his mind, and though it didn't necessarily seem the most pressing, there was one thing that bothered Sizhui more than the rest. No matter how he tried, he couldn't quite wrap his head around it, and his confused contemplation must have shown on his face, because Jingyi stilled when he looked at him.

"Are you okay, Sizhui?"

"I think so," Sizhui said, but Jingyi frowned and Zizhen propped himself up on his elbows from where he'd already been lying down beneath a blanket. Even Jinling paused, frowning at him. Sizhui smiled tiredly. "I'm fine."

"Uh huh," Jingyi sounded utterly unconvinced. For a moment, his face wore nothing but his familiar dry disbelief, but then it shifted into concern, and his voice grew lower. "Sizhui, if you're worried about Nainai changing her mind, or Yeye saying no, you should know they won't."

"I know," Sizhui said, smiling a little despite himself. "Nainai never lies." In truth, Lu Meilin was among Sizhui's very favourite relatives, and she and Lan Liqin had acted as his grandparents for almost as long as he could remember.

When they were six, she had responded to Jingyi's shocked discovery that Sizhui had no grandparents of his own by insisting that the younger boy refer to her and her husband as Nainai and Yeye from then on. When Sizhui hesitantly asked Lan Liqin if he minded, the man had laughed and pinched his cheek gently, declaring that while he already had a dozen odd grandchildren, life could only get better with one more. He had also sternly shut down any outside suggestion that Sizhui should address them differently, saying that he had been told to call them Nainai and Yeye, and was clearly showing nothing but respect and obedience by observing their wishes. Things would be different now, of course, and there was a big difference between letting an orphaned child call you Yeye and claiming a nineteen year old stranger as your illegitimate son, but Sizhui trusted that, if nothing else, Lu Meilin would keep to her word.

"Then what's the matter?" pressed Jingyi, his frown deepening.

Sizhui paused, biting down on his lip. He really shouldn't say anything aloud – it wasn't his business, let alone anyone else's, but now all three of the others were staring at him in concern, and he sighed.

Though the strange, overexcited feeling in his golden core suggested that casting the silencing spell again would be simple, the exhaustion was stronger than ever, so Sizhui didn't risk it. Instead, he grabbed a blank piece of talisman paper from the side, scribbling a quick silencing charm onto it and flinging it against the curtain.

"I can't quite figure out the timeline," he said quietly. "I..." He trailed off, biting down harder on his lip.

"What about the timeline?" prompted Jingyi. "What's wrong?"

"I don't know," Sizhui admitted with a sigh. "But when I spoke to Hanguang Jun, he said that he and Wei-qianbei aren't courting yet."

"What?" Jingyi frowned heavily, while Zizhen exclaimed the same word with a look of utter surprise.

"What do you mean courting?" he cried, and Sizhui shushed him, glancing over his shoulder at the talisman. It was still glowing comfortingly, but still...

"Keep your voice down," Sizhui pleaded, and Zizhen winced apologetically.

"Sorry. But what do you mean courting? Hanguang Jun and Wei-qianbei aren't courting!"

"They were in our time!" Jingyi protested. "Either engaged or married is my bet."

"They were neither engaged nor married," Sizhui frowned. "Hanguang Jun would have told me. And you shouldn't make bets about other peoples' personal lives, Jingyi. But yes, they were courting."

"I – but – how do you know?" Zizhen breathed, leaning forward with eyes alight with excitement. "I never, I never even guessed, but..."

"Well, you don't know Hanguang Jun as well," Jingyi allowed. "But it was obvious the moment he met Wei-qianbei on Dafan Mountain. The way they act together, the way they talk, the way they fight. Hell, I mean even the way they look at each other!"

"Mn." Sizhui nodded. "Hanguang Jun is... reserved, in his affection. But never with Wei-qianbei."

"I..." Zizhen began, but then his frown gave way to a grin. "That... you know that actually makes a lot of sense – I never guessed, but – but oh, that makes so much sense!"

"Plus there was that whole declaration of love on the stairs at Jinlintai," said Jingyi, and Jinling frowned.

"What are you talking about?" he demanded.

“Well you were there,” said Jingyi. “When you, you know...”

Jinling’s cheeks burnt bright red and he winced, eyes flickering to the curtain. “Shut up!”

“I wasn’t going to say it,” protested Jingyi, and Zizhen sighed.

“Guys,” he said, in the perfect warning tone of a weary sibling. After a moment, he added. “I didn’t hear about any love declaration on the stairs.”

“There wasn’t one,” Jinling protested. “Hanguang Jun just stared at Wei Wuxian and said something about walking on log bridges in the dark.”

Jingyi nodded as though that proved his point. “Exactly.”

“That does sound like the sort of veiled confession that happens in all the love stories,” said Zizhen, looking curiously at Jinling. “Do you think they weren’t courting?”

Jinling scowled, folding his arms across his chest. “I don’t know, and I don’t care. After – I’m not thinking about the love lives of any other member of my family ever again. If they get married great, good for them, I get another uncle, but I don’t want to know any more than that, thank you very much.”

Zizhen grimaced sympathetically. “Fair enough.”

“It’s not important,” Sizhui insisted. This conversation was getting out of hand. “Who said what when isn’t the point, and their love lives are none of our business. It’s just... if they’re not courting now, and it’s only two days until-” He broke off, his gut twisting, and he dug his nails into his palm. “I can’t figure out how that makes any sense.”

Zizhen hummed to himself thoughtfully. “And you’re sure they were courting at Dafan mountain?”

Sizhui considered that. “I think so... They certainly acted like it in Cloud Recess and that was not even a day later.”

“It’s probably a good thing the sword-spirit knocked out Lan-xiansheng,” Jingyi said. “If he saw Wei-qianbei lounging all over Hanguang Jun like that he’d probably have gone into qi –”

The curtain burst open.

Sizhui gasped, twisting around to stare at Jin Zixuan, who was plucking the talisman down and staring at it for a moment. Then, he nodded to himself, and turned to face them, holding out the glowing talisman.

“Are you aware,” he said quietly, “that if these two characters here are switched, the effect of the talisman is reversed?”

Horror struck Sizhui in the chest, draining the blood from his face. “You didn’t – we – it-”

“Yes,” said Jin Zixuan awkwardly, his face burning red. “We heard everything.”

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! I hope you enjoyed this chapter, please do let me know what you think!

Just as a heads up, from now on I am going to probably update every two days rather than every day - we're getting towards the end of what I've already written, and I'd like to try and update consistently so I need to give myself a little more time. Sorry for any inconvenience!

# Chapter 15

## Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for the awesome response to the last chapter, and for your patience! I hope you enjoy this one, too!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The words rang through the Burial Mounds, freezing the group who had barely left the entrance to the Demon Subdue Palace. Stunned into horror-struck silence, Wei Wuxian stared at Lan Qiren's purple, furious face, and Wen Qing, whose eyebrows were raised, and Lu Meilin, who looked like she was smiling, and he knew there was only one thing he could possibly do.

Wen Qing's eyes narrowed. "Don't you dare –"

With a strangled squeak, Wei Wuxian turned tail, and sprinted into the Burial Mounds.

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Lan Wangji ran his hand over A-Yuan's hair, finding the motion oddly comforting himself as the child sighed in his sleep, snuggling closer to his chest. This boy was Wei Ying's now, more than ever, in every way, and it seemed right. It seemed true. Wangji would be an uncle, perhaps, if Wei Ying was open to his being so forward. If not, Rich-gege was more than enough. He would never be Baba, not to this A-Yuan, but if that was the price to pay for Wei Ying's life, Lan Wangji would pay a thousand times. He –

*"I just can't quite figure out the timeline."* The voice was sudden and unexpected, somehow both hushed and loud, and clear as though the speaker was talking quietly at Wangji's side, but the voice was also Sizhui's, and Sizhui was tucked away in the back room, behind the curtain.

Lan Wangji looked towards it with a frown, as Jingyi's voice answered equally clearly.

*"What about the timeline? What's wrong?"*

A quick glance at Jin Zixuan and the Jiang siblings was enough to see the confusion and concern on their faces, and Wangji turned his eyes back to the curtain.

*"I don't know,"* Sizhui's voice admitted. *"But when I spoke to Hanguang Jun, he said that he and Wei-qianbei aren't courting yet."*

The words struck the centre of Wangji's chest like an axe blow, and he felt the world fall away from beneath him even as his body became stiller than stone

*“What do you mean courting?”* cried Zizhen, and a desperate denial clawed at Lan Wangji’s mind. This wasn’t – this couldn’t be happening, not, not where everyone could hear, not –

But it was, it was happening, because A-Yuan had woken in his arms, and he was rubbing his eyes and frowning at the noise. “Rich-gege?”

*“Keep your voice down!”*

*“Sorry. But what do you mean courting? Hanguang Jun and Wei-qianbei aren’t courting!”*

“Rich-gege?” A-Yuan asked again, his lower lip sticking out in a pout. “Why’s it so loud?”

Lan Wangji couldn’t answer. He couldn’t move, couldn’t breathe. Humiliation had frozen every cell in his body, and his stomach swam as though he was about to be sick. Out of the corner of his eye he could vaguely make out the shape of Jin Zixuan and the Jiang siblings, and he could feel their eyes boring into him, but he couldn’t look over. Even if he had been able to move, he wouldn’t have been able to look over.

*“They were in our time! Either engaged or married is my bet.”* There was Jingyi’s voice again, and the words chased each other through the tangled mess of Wangji’s mind as his ears burnt painfully.

Engaged – married – Wei Ying –

Impossibly, Lan Wangji’s horror grew stronger. Could *Wei Ying* hear this?

Sizhui’s voice came again. *“They were neither engaged nor married. Hanguang Jun would have told me. And you shouldn’t make bets about other peoples’ personal lives, Jingyi. But yes, they were courting.”*

*“I – but – how do you know? I never, I never even guessed, but...”*

Never guessed – it wasn’t announced, wasn’t known –

*“Well, you don’t know Hanguang Jun as well, but it was obvious the moment he met Wei-qianbei on Dafan Mountain. The way they act together, the way they talk, the way they fight. Hell, I mean even the way they look at each other!”*

*“Mn. Hanguang Jun is... reserved, in his affection. But never with Wei-qianbei.”*

He needed to leave. He needed to leave now, to get out of this place and away from the voices of the juniors, the eyes of Jin Zixuan and the Jiangs, he needed to –

He needed to *run* —

*“I...That... you know that actually makes a lot of sense – I never guessed, but – but oh, that makes so much sense!”*

But he couldn’t run – even if Wangji could move, he couldn’t take A-Yuan with him, and he couldn’t leave him here – all the Wen had gone with Wei Ying, and A-Yuan didn’t know the



others left in the cave. Think, he had to think –

*“Plus there was that whole declaration of love on the stairs at Jinlintai.”*

No! The word screamed through Wangji’s mind like an alarm.

For the first time, Jinling’s voice sounded among the others. *“What are you talking about?”*

Whatever it was, whatever Lan Jingyi was going to recall, it was not meant for here, for this life, this time, this place, and panic clawed at the inside of Wangji’s throat.

*“Well, you were there. When you, you know...”*

*“Shut up!”*

*“I wasn’t going to say it!”*

Had to move, had to run, had to leave, but A-Yuan –

*“Guys...I didn’t hear about any love declaration on the stairs.”*

*“There wasn’t one. Hanguang Jun just stared at Wei Wuxian and said something about walking on log bridges in the dark.”*

Something broke, and Wangji felt the air leave his lungs in a sharp gasp. Vaguely, he could hear Jiang Yanli calling his name gently, but it was almost inaudible beyond the panic rushing in his ears. He stood up, the motion jerking and inelegant, and A-Yuan gave a small squeak of surprise.

*“Exactly!”* crowed Jingyi’s voice, and Ouyang Zizhen’s replied.

*“That does sound like the kind of confession they give in all the love stories. Do you think they weren’t courting, Jinling?”*

“Excuse me,” Lan Wangji mumbled, the words falling awkwardly from his lips as he bolted towards the door. He could hear Jiang Yanli calling him again, but he could also hear Jinling’s reply.

*“I don’t know, and I don’t care. After – I’m not thinking about the love lives of any member of my family ever again. If they get married great, good for them, I get another uncle, but I don’t want to know any more than that, thank you very much.”*

*“Fair enough...”*

Wangji reached the door of the cave and froze. If Wei Ying was standing outside, he – he would have to walk past Wei Ying to be free, he would have to see the look on his face –

*“It’s not important,” Sizhui insisted. “Who said what when isn’t the point, and their love lives are none of our business. It’s just... if they’re not courting now, and it’s only two days until - I can’t figure out how that makes any sense.”*

But Lan Wangji understood, and it made sense, and he forced himself out of the door. Standing barely six feet away, his uncle stared at him, looking utterly aghast, and Lu Meilin was grinning, and Wen Qing was shaking her head slightly. When she saw Lan Wangji, the younger woman nodded, holding out her arms for A-Yuan.

Gratefully, Wangji surrendered him, his heart aching at A-Yuan's whimper of protest.

"He went that way," Wen Qing said, nodding towards the woods.

"Thank you," Lan Wangji said stiffly, strangely, and then he turned in the opposite direction and walked away as quickly as he could, not running only to try and avoid drawing the ire of his uncle.

It seemed, however, that he had drawn that anyway – he could hear Lan Qiren shouting his name, but he pretended he couldn't hear. If he couldn't hear, he couldn't reply, couldn't return –

He couldn't breathe.

Sizhui may say that it did not make sense, that he didn't understand, but Lan Wangji did – he understood all too well, and his heart quailed beneath the weight of it. He could already hear the promises he would have made to himself when Wei Ying died, promises of searching and of Inquiry and of what he would do if he could find him again.

Lan Wangji knew that if he had found Wei Ying again, after mourning for so many years he would have been unable to restrain himself properly. A hand on the shoulder here, a grip on the wrist there. He would need to be with Wei Ying, to see him and feel him and know that he was still breathing – things that would seem remarkable to those that knew him so well.

Things that Wei Ying, who thrived on touch and threw his arms over the shoulders of everyone who called a friend, would probably never notice. Wei Ying would reciprocate, but he would not understand. Because he didn't want – Wangji knew he didn't want –

A tree branch caught his arm, ripping right through his robes and slicing at his skin, and with a start Lan Wangji realised there were tears in his eyes, blurring the grey land before him. He was not sure exactly why he was crying. Perhaps it was the burn of humiliation, the knowledge that others now knew of his pitiful longing for a man who did not want him, or the crushing pain of logic burying the fledgling hope he had felt the first time Sizhui mentioned that in the future, he and Wei Ying were courting.

Or maybe, it was just the fear. There was so much of it in his mind that it was wrenching his breath from him in near-frantic gasps, so it could well be what was blurring his eyesight, too. His heart was beating desperately, frantically, a butterfly trying to tear its wings free of a thorn bush. He was afraid that after this, Wei Ying would no longer be able to look at him, that Wei Ying would be disgusted or angry or upset – he was afraid of the looks on the faces of the others, afraid of his uncle's disdain. Afraid of having to stand and pretend that he felt nothing as Wei Ying edged away from him.

But no. It was none of that. It was worse than that.

Because the only thing worse than a world where Wei Ying hated him was a world without Wei Ying in it, and as his shock and shame and fear cracked the careful control of his mind, panic and horror and pain bled through.

His own imagination tormented him, flashing images through his mind, Wei Ying stabbed, Wei Ying shot, Wei Ying falling –

Wei Ying hitting the ground. Wei Ying breaking.

Two days.

It happened in two days.

But no – it wouldn't, it couldn't, because Sizhui had come back and they were prepared, and –

*And Jin Guangyao had come back.*

Jin Guangyao, who was unaccounted for, who wanted Xichen – Xichen, who was missing. Lan Wangji's xiongzhang was *missing*, and Lan Wangji was stumbling wildly through the Burial Mounds like an emotional child. He needed to focus, to breathe, to *control himself*, but for the first time in his life, Wangji couldn't, and his mind replaced the pictures of Wei Ying with his brother, and he saw a sword sinking into Xiongzhang's stomach, and he saw Xiongzhang with a guqin wire around his neck –

What he didn't see was the edge of the wards that shielded the Wen encampment from the rest of the Burial Mounds.

Lan Wangji did not see those until it was too late.

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In another life, Wei Wuxian might have found the broadcasting of an 'are they aren't they' conversation about his and Lan Zhan's love life hilarious.

In another life.

Because in this one, his chest was burning with sobs he wouldn't let out, and his heart was pounding against his ribcage so hard it hurt. Pushing through the tangled trees of the Burial Mounds, he couldn't run fast enough. His blood was pounding through his ears, burning on his cheeks, the humiliation almost as strong as it had been the day on Phoenix Mountain, when Shijie had defended him from Jin Zixun.

*"...what do you mean courting? Hanguang Jun and Wei-qianbei aren't courting!"*

Of course they weren't. Of course they never would be. Wei Wuxian felt tears sting his eyes. Why, in any world, would Lan Zhan want to be with someone like him? A demonic cultivator with a reputation blacker than ink, a man who practised the type of cultivation Lan Zhan hated the most. A son of a servant who never learnt his rightful place, who brought destruction down on everyone he loved? A terrible cook with bad taste and questionable manners – a man who embodied everything Lan Zhan disliked?

It was enough that Lan Zhan wanted to be his friend. It had always been enough, it always would be.

Or it would have been.

It was unlikely that Lan Zhan would want to be friends with him after this. He'd feel too embarrassed, too awkward. The best Wei Wuxian could hope for was Lan Zhan's pity, but that was almost as unbearable as the idea of Lan Zhan hating him. Almost.

A sharp, burning sensation struck Wei Wuxian in the gut, and he froze, digging his hand into his robes to find a talisman already falling to ash in his fingers.

Wei Wuxian's heart stopped.

The back wards. Someone had crossed through the back wards. Someone had stepped into the untamed wild of the Burial Mounds, into the depths that Wei Wuxian had yet to cleanse. Even with the amulet, the task of clearing all resentment from the Burial Mounds was nearly impossible, and the energy that gathered so deep in the back of the mountain it had seemed irrelevant. The Wen knew not to go there, even *A-Yuan* knew to never go near the wards alone, let alone through them –

But the others didn't. Jiang Cheng, Shijie, Lan Zhan – they didn't know. If one of them had come after him, had fallen into the part of the Burial Mounds that was still as vicious as it had been when Wen Chao threw him from the sky –

His heart leapt into his throat, and Wei Wuxian threw himself through the trees, sprinting back as fast as he could. He skirted around the edge of the forest, cutting as straight a path as he could to the place where he could feel the break in the wards. It took less than three minutes to get there, but every second felt like an hour.

Finally, he saw it, a great mass of black smoke forming a wall against the wards, preventing whoever was on the other side from getting back in. The resentful energy had curled around them, swallowing them completely, and snakes of black smoke were coiled around a white sword, tugging it slowly along the ground, tauntingly out of reach of the hand that stretched for it, fingers trembling.

Bichen.

*Lan Zhan.*

Terror ripped a cry from Wei Wuxian's throat even as he lurched forward, diving through the wards and ducking around the wall the resentful energy had formed. Without stopping, he threw a talisman with as much power as he had, and the smoke sprang back. Lan Zhan was on his hands and knees, his arm outstretched towards his sword, but his entire body was shuddering violently, and glistening on his cheeks were tears of blood.

*No, no, no –*

Wei Wuxian lurched for him, grabbing Lan Zhan around the chest and hauling him back towards the wards. The resentful energy screamed its protest in his ears, clawing at Lan Zhan with talons of smoke, but Wei Wuxian let out a sharp whistle, snatching another talisman from his robes and casting it to blast away the wall of resentful energy behind them. He tugged Lan Zhan back through the wards, and then his knees gave out beneath them, and they crumpled to the ground. Lan Zhan tumbled onto the dirt, his body still jerking and spasming, and Wei Wuxian scrambled to his knees, fumbling in his robes for the right talisman.

“Hold on, Lan Zhan,” he begged, his voice low and rough and desperate. “Hold on, just hold on, please!”

It took him a moment to find what he was looking for. The paper slipped and slid through his fingers, sheaths too thin to get any real grip on, and every one that he thumbed through was wrong. Beneath him, Lan Zhan began to choke, his neck straining and arching as his eyes bulged wide, and a sob wrenched from Wei Wuxian’s throat.

“Just a second, just a second!”

It had to be here, it had to, there wasn’t time and Lan Zhan – Lan Zhan was choking, there wasn’t *time* and he couldn’t find, it wasn’t – *there!* He activated the talisman as quickly as he could, but the second he had to wait for it to glow seemed to last a lifetime. The moment it did, he slammed it down on to Lan Zhan’s chest.

The talisman burnt a furious red, and at once Lan Zhan began to gag, his entire body lurching with the movement. Wei Wuxian grabbed his shoulder, tugging the other man onto his side as a coil of thick, dark smoke poured from Lan Zhan’s mouth, pooling onto the ground below like a snake spilling from a tree. It seemed endless, a surge of relentless hatred intent on choking the life out of Lan Zhan even as he retched and choked, but as strong as it was, the talisman was stronger. Eventually, the smoke began to slow, and then Lan Zhan was coughing up blood instead. For a frightening minute, he was still choking and retching, but then he took a rasping, shuddering breath, and then another, and Wei Wuxian let himself breathe, as well.

“It’s okay,” he murmured, squeezing Lan Zhan’s shoulder. “It’s okay, you’re okay now...”

With a final spluttering choke, the last of the resentful energy was expelled from Lan Zhan, and Wei Wuxian eliminated it all with a flick of his hand. Lan Zhan tried to push himself upright, his arms trembling beneath him, but he coughed again, a spray of blood covered the barren dirt. Wei Wuxian winced, holding Lan Zhan up until the retching had stopped, and then helping him sit up.

He expected Lan Zhan to right himself almost at once, to kneel with perfect posture or cross his legs, but he didn’t. He didn’t even wipe his face. His legs were bent awkwardly beneath him, pointing out to the side, and his shoulders were slumped forward. His head bowed low, and he was still breathing heavily.

“Look at me,” Wei Wuxian demanded, seizing Lan Zhan’s chin and pulling his face around when the other man hesitated. He studied Lan Zhan’s eyes intently, but they weren’t bleeding anymore, and though they looked a little red, it wasn’t anything to be too worried about – not

when his eyes were focusing, and his pupils were the same size. Relief stole all the strength from his body, and Wei Wuxian slumped, dropping his hands. “You’re okay. You’re okay. What the hell were you *doing*?”

Lan Zhan stared at him for a long moment, eyes still wide and afraid, and then he looked down, his face crumpling in pain. “Wei Ying...”

“You could’ve died, Lan Zhan,” Wei Wuxian insisted, ignoring the way his heart picked up speed at the sound of his name in that voice, that *tone*. Really, if Lan Zhan didn’t want people to fall in love with him, he shouldn’t say their names in such a way. “What the hell were you *doing*?”

Lan Zhan’s eyes squeezed shut, and he shook his head slightly. There was still blood on his cheeks and his lips, and he looked so vulnerable, and Wei Wuxian hated it. “Didn’t see the wards,” he whispered, his voice rasping in a way that sounded painful. “An accident...”

“Well,” Wei Wuxian’s voice stuck in his throat. “That was a stupid thing to do, anyway.”

“Wei Ying,” Lan Zhan said again, opening his eyes and staring at Wei Wuxian. “I’m sorry.”

Wei Wuxian closed his eyes, shaking his head slightly. Of course, Lan Zhan was enough of a gentleman to feel like he needed to apologise for being so disturbed by the concept of Wei Wuxian’s affection that he would fling himself headfirst into the Burial Mounds. “Ah, Lan Zhan... It’s okay.”

“Wei Ying.” Lan Zhan’s voice was a plea, pained and broken, and Wei Wuxian couldn’t help but open his eyes again. Lan Zhan looked so wounded, so defeated, and it churned his stomach. That he could make Lan Zhan feel like that – “I – you must know I would never ask it of you. I know you do not want – Whatever they saw, I – I will not do it again.”

What?

*What?*

“W-what?”

Lan Zhan’s eyes fluttered closed, and he bowed his head. “I am sorry. Whatever I did then – whatever they saw – I would have known that it was not what you wanted. It was selfish. I am sorry.”

A sudden feeling of intense cold crashed down over Wei Wuxian as the implied meaning of the words sunk in, and he seized Lan Zhan’s wrist, pushing his fingers against the other man’s pulse point and searching his spiritual energy, his eyes flickering to the softly glowing talisman still stuck to Lan Zhan’s robes. It didn’t make sense – there was no sign there that Lan Zhan was possessed, but what he was saying, it sounded like what he was saying was –

“Wei Ying,” said Lan Zhan, and at first his voice was sterner, harder, but then it broke, becoming raw and wounded, and almost betrayed. “Do not joke.”

“I’m not joking,” Wei Wuxian replied, letting his eyes flicker back up to the other man’s face. “I had – had to be sure... I don’t, I don’t understand what you’re saying, Lan Zhan. What – what is it you think that I don’t want?”

Lan Zhan bowed his head once more. “I – I know you do not want... me...”

For a moment, Wei Wuxian couldn’t breathe. He felt like he had fallen into the path of a tornado, that it was throwing him around so fast he couldn’t catch his breath, that he was falling and spinning and flying all at once. He was so dizzy that it was almost a surprise to remember that the world wasn’t spinning around him, and it was almost a minute before he was able to choke out a reply. “What – what the *hell* would make you think *that*?”

Confusion furrowed Lan Zhan’s eyebrows just a little, and for a moment there was a strange, desperate hope in his eyes. Then he blinked, and it was drowned by a fear that hurt Wei Wuxian’s heart to see. “In the caves. I – I confessed my feelings. You said nothing. I assumed that you would prefer pretending I never said anything.”

Wei Wuxian’s heartbeat frantically in his chest, even as he shook his head in bewilderment. “What are you talking about? What caves?”

“The Xuanwu,” said Lan Zhan. “After we killed it.”

“Lan Zhan,” Wei Wuxian said in disbelief, “Lan Zhan, after we killed the Xuanwu, I wasn’t conscious.”

Lan Zhan’s jaw set, but there was a horrible vulnerability in his eyes. “You were conscious enough to ask the name of the song.”

“Yes, but I don’t actually remember hearing it!” Wei Wuxian cried in exasperation. “Lan Zhan, I don’t remember *anything* you said to me in the cave after we killed that thing!”

Lan Zhan’s eyes only widened a fraction, but the emotions that flashed across them were nearly too fast for Wei Wuxian to name. Surprise, sorrow, relief, disbelief, fear. “You... do not remember?”

“No.” Somehow, the word came out like a promise. “I don’t. But...” Wei Wuxian’s voice caught in his throat, and he felt his cheeks begin to burn.

Every fibre of his being screamed against saying the words in his mind aloud – ordering him not to lay his feelings bare before him, or be vulnerable in front of Lan Zhan, or speak as though he thought even for a moment he was worthy of the things he wished for.

He closed his eyes. “You’re wrong. That I don’t want to be with you. I do. God, I do. But Lan Zhan... you should be with someone who is your equal, someone good and bright and – and I can’t be that.”

There was a hand on his wrist, strong and warm, and Wei Wuxian’s heart stumbled. “Wei Ying... you – *want* to be with me?” A lump rose in Wei Wuxian’s throat, and he nodded, not

daring to try and speak around it. Not daring to open his eyes. He heard Lan Zhan draw in a sharp breath, heard his voice tremble as he whispered, “Wei Ying...”

And Wei Wuxian’s heart broke. “Lan Zhan – wait.” Against his better judgement, he opened his eyes, unable to help but cringe at the look on Lan Zhan’s face. There was wonder and fear in his eyes, wonder Wei Wuxian didn’t deserve, and fear that he certainly did. And there were tears in Lan Zhan’s eyes, too, as he whispered,

“Wait?”

“We – you can’t,” Wei Wuxian struggled to force the words out, crooking the corner of his mouth into a smile as though that would hide the tears he could feel stinging his cheeks. “I – you deserve more, Lan Zhan. More than this. More than me.”

Lan Zhan’s jaw set stubbornly, a little of the fear fading from his eyes. “No.”

“Yes,” Wei Wuxian said, fighting to keep his voice from breaking.

“You are wrong,” said Lan Zhan. “There is no more than Wei Ying. And if there was, I would not want it.”

Wei Wuxian’s heart broke further, and he swallowed. The words were perfect, and he would hold them in his heart until the day he died, but, “Lan Zhan – you deserve someone who can be with you forever, and I... I can’t. I want to, more than *anything*, Lan Zhan, but I can’t.”

Lan Zhan stiffened, his hand tightening around Wei Wuxian’s wrist. The fear in his eyes was growing strong again. “Why?”

It would be easier to tell him the way he had told Jiang Cheng – Lan Zhan’s hand was already around his wrist. He would just need to shift his fingers, and he would know, but when Wei Wuxian put his hand on Lan Zhan’s he found that he couldn’t move it. He couldn’t bear to.

So instead, he took a deep breath and tried to smile. Tried to make this as painless as possible.

Tried to ignore the voice in the back of his mind that scoffed at the thought it could be anything less than an agony for both of them.

Hopefully, Lan Zhan hadn’t fallen too far. Hopefully, there was healing yet for him.

“I didn’t mean for you to ever know,” he admitted, and his voice began to tremble. Despite himself, he found his hand tightening around Lan Zhan’s, and at once Lan Zhan’s other hand covered it, and Wei Wuxian took another deep breath. “No one, no one was supposed to, but apparently people found out, in the future and... and future Jiang Cheng made Sizhui and the others promise to make me tell him, and, and I did, but – I – didn’t want to tell anyone else but... Well, it seems painfully obvious those four aren’t great at keeping secrets and *they* know, and Jiang Cheng knows and Shijie knows, and if – you should know, before you do anything you might regret, because-”

Lan Zhan’s hand squeezed his slightly. “Wei Ying...”



Wei Wuxian closed his eyes. “I don’t have a golden core. I... I gave it to Jiang Cheng. After Lotus Pier was burnt. Wen Zhuliu had crushed his, so I gave him mine. Wen Qing did it for me. He, he didn’t know until today.”

There was silence, and Wei Wuxian cringed. He pulled his hands back, and Lan Zhan let him, and he closed his eyes tighter. Waited.

Lan Zhan said nothing.

The silence grew heavier around him, crushing in on him until he couldn’t bear it any longer, and he opened his eyes, and –

“Oh, Lan *Zhan*...”

He was crying. Lan Zhan was there, and Lan Zhan was *crying*, tears streaming down his cheeks and his whole body was shaking, he was *sobbing* and somehow he was still silent and it was wrong, it was wrong it was all wrong –

“Don’t cry!” Wei Wuxian begged, shifting a little closer. “Lan Zhan, Lan Zhan, don’t cry, it’s okay. I’m okay, I’m fine, really, don’t cry. Please, don’t cry.”

But Lan Zhan just looked at him, the tears on his cheeks mingling with the blood already there, and it looked like he was bleeding again, and he choked, “Wei Ying...”

“It’s okay,” promised Wei Wuxian, his hands hovering uselessly at his sides. He wanted to wipe Lan Zhan’s tears away, to hold him until he stopped crying, or at least to squeeze his shoulder or something like that, but he didn’t know where they were, and he didn’t know what Lan Zhan wanted, or what would help. “Please, Lan Zhan, don’t cry. Don’t cry. I’m okay. I’m okay.”

“Wei Ying...” Lan Zhan whispered. “I am sorry.”

“Ah, no, no!” Wei Wuxian cried, unable to stop himself leaning forward and grabbing Lan Zhan’s trembling hands. “No, stop that, Lan Zhan! You’ve got nothing to be sorry about.”

“Should... should have seen. Should have realised why... why...” Lan Zhan’s voice was strangled as his eyes moved down to Wei Wuxian’s belt, to Chenqing, and then he shuddered, bowing his head. “I am sorry.”

“I didn’t want anyone to know!” protested Wei Wuxian desperately, squeezing Lan Zhan’s hands. “Lan Zhan, this isn’t your fault. What happened with my core, the demonic cultivation – it has nothing to do with you. It’s not your fault, it wasn’t your responsibility to see. You can’t blame yourself for not seeing what was hidden from you. That’s not fair. Please...”

Slowly, Lan Zhan raised his head, his tears glistening on his cheeks. “Wei Ying... I love you.”

Wei Wuxian’s breath caught in his throat, and he swallowed. “Are... are you sure it’s what you want?” he whispered.

“I love you. Only you.” Lan Zhan spoke the words like a vow, and his fingers shifted to wind around Wei Wuxian’s. “I love you.”

“Oh, Lan Zhan...” Wei Wuxian let out a strangled laugh. “I... I love you, too.”

Lan Zhan blinked, wonder shining once again behind the tears in his eyes, and then he reached out, wiping the tears from Wei Wuxian’s cheeks with his thumb.

“Hey,” Wei Wuxian pouted, reaching up to return the favour. “That was my idea first.” He brushed his thumbs over Lan Zhan’s cheeks, wiping away the tears and the blood as gently as he could. He shivered, but he couldn’t help but let his hands linger there a moment. Disbelief stole his breath for a moment, disbelief that a man like this could really, truly, want him. “Lan Zhan, are you sure?”

Lan Zhan frowned, his eyebrows twinging down slightly the way they did when he was annoyed, and alarm fluttered in Wei Wuxian’s heart –

And Lan Zhan leant forward

And kissed him.

A million thoughts exploded in Wei Wuxian’s mind, but they were all too fast and fierce and free to catch, and he froze.

Lan Zhan paused, drawing back a fraction, but that was the last thing Wei Wuxian wanted, and he let himself tumble forward, returning the kiss desperately. For a moment, it was a little awkward – they were on their knees in the dirt, and he wasn’t sure what he was doing with his hands, but then Lan Zhan’s hand came to rest on the back of his hair, pulling him closer, and Wei Wuxian felt his arms wrap around the other man’s shoulders without any instruction from his brain. Which was good, because there was nothing in his brain but dancing lights and faraway thoughts and the words *Lan Zhan, Lan Zhan, Lan Zhan!*

It could have been a lifetime later that Lan Zhan finally pulled away, breathing heavily with much more control than Wei Wuxian, who was gasping for breath like a man half drowned. The very corner of Lan Zhan’s mouth twitched towards a smile, though there was a strange shyness in his eyes, and his ears were burning red as he spoke.

“Is that answer sufficient?”

“More than sufficient,” Wei Wuxian breathed, leaning back, but reluctant to take his arms away from Lan Zhan. “I still don’t understand why, but I know you’re sure.”

Lan Zhan frowned heavily, drawing back a little further. “You do not understand why.”

Wei Wuxian felt himself blush again. “Ah, Lan Zhan. If we go into all that now, we’ll never get anything done. We’ve got bigger things to worry about, hm?”

At once, Lan Zhan’s irritation gave way to concern, his eyes flickering towards the north even as his hand came up to grasp Wei Wuxian’s arm. “Xiongzhang,” he murmured, so

quietly that Wei Wuxian would have missed it if he hadn't been sitting so close. He let his hand stroke the back of Lan Zhan's hair.

"He'll be okay, Lan Zhan," he promised, praying that he could keep it. "Jin Guangyao won't want to hurt him, and we'll find him. And he's nearly as strong and smart as you – he'll be fine."

Lan Zhan frowned a little at the teasing, but then he nodded. Though Lan Zhan was never exactly elaborate in his movements, something about the gesture seemed particularly small, and sympathy panged over Wei Wuxian's heart. He shifted closer again, pulling Lan Zhan into a hug. He almost expected the other man to stiffen, but instead Lan Zhan seemed to melt into the embrace, pressing his face into Wei Wuxian's neck and letting him hold him close.

"We'll find him," he whispered into Lan Zhan's hair. "He'll be okay."

Lan Zhan nodded, and then he drew back slightly, taking Wei Wuxian's shoulders. "As you will be."

"What?"

"We will fix it," Lan Zhan said firmly. There were no tears in his eyes anymore – in their place was a fire that promised to let nothing stand in his way. "Your golden core. We will fix it."

Wei Wuxian's heart sank. "Ah, Lan Zhan –"

"Not now. Other matters are more urgent. But we will fix it."

"Okay, Lan Zhan," Wei Wuxian whispered, even as guilt curdled his stomach. Perhaps he could get Wen Qing to talk to Lan Zhan for him, to explain why that was hopeless.

For now, Lan Zhan was right. They were more urgent matters to attend to.

## Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed this chapter! In terms of writing, romance is the thing I am the least comfortable with and I am well aware it is not my strong point, so if there are any ways you think I could improve please don't hesitate to let me know. Until next time, please take care!

# Chapter 16

## Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for all your comments and kudos! I'm so glad you guys are enjoying this fic!

Minor Edit: It was during a re-watch today that I noticed that A-Yuan calls when Wen Qing 'Qing-jiejie' rather than 'Qing-gugu' so I've changed that now

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It was a lot to take in. In truth, when she looked back at everything they had learnt Yanli was not entirely sure which part of the story hurt her the most. The thought that Zixuan might have died *today*, this morning, that he would have been ripped out of her life and away from their baby forever – that was a knife in her heart, twisting as it drove deeper. The idea of A-Xian dying, of the clans aligning to destroy him, of her baby brother falling from a cliff and breaking at the bottom – that was an arrow in her neck, razor sharp and choked with horror. The notion that A-Cheng may have been *involved* in A-Xian's death – that was poison in her stomach, churning and swirling and burning her from the inside out. The image of A-Xian and A-Cheng plunging knives into their chests in a last, frantic attempt to save her baby and her nephew and their friends – that was a sword through her lungs, draining the air from her lungs even as the pain threatened to overwhelm her.

Other parts of the tale were less crippling, but only fractionally. A-Cheng had been left alone at Lotus Pier, had been forced to struggle with rebuilding the sect and caring for her baby and recovering from the grief of losing his siblings alone. Her baby had grown up an orphan, had spent his life without Zixuan and without her, and the uncle who had half raised him had also betrayed him and kidnapped him and hurt him. A-Xian's little A-Yuan had been left to starve in a place as dark as this, had grown up with no memory of her brother at all.

And that was without even starting to go into the wrongs that had been committed against the Wens in both lifetimes, without even thinking about the crimes of Jin Guangyao and Jin Guangshan and Xue Yang.

It was too much to bear – but Jiang Yanli would bear it. She would bear it silently, carefully, and at some point in the near future she would find somewhere to sit and cry for a while. She could not cry now – not yet. For all they had grown and achieved and suffered, her little brothers were still scarcely out of their teens, little more than children, and they needed her now. They needed her to be strong, and to be calm, and if Yanli knew anything, it was where she was needed the most.

Or did she?

How could she, when she had so clearly been needed *here*? If she had just seen the camp of the Wens, heard a fraction of what Zixuan and A-Xian clearly had, she would have – well, she would not have done nothing. She should have known that A-Xian needed her. A small, guilty voice in the back of her head wondered if perhaps she did, if she *had* known, and had chosen to stay in Jinlintai regardless.

Whether she knew or not, it was her failure either way, and Yanli would carry it silently. She couldn't dwell on it. It wouldn't do anyone any good. But she *could* atone for it, and she would, starting now.

Of course, the things she could do at this very moment were not much, in the big scheme of things. As the time-travellers words rang out through the cave, Lan Wangji had left so quickly he had barely seemed to notice her calling after him, and she did not think that chasing him down would be the best thing to do. With any luck, he was going to speak to A-Xian, but Yanli had a hunch that was not the young man's intention.

If that was the case she would do what she could to pick up the pieces later. In the meantime, she had another younger brother to chide.

"A-Cheng..."

Obediently, A-Cheng stopped laughing, though he made no move to hide the grin from his face. She raised her eyebrows, and A-Cheng's grin grew stronger. "A-Jie," he said, "you can't say he doesn't deserve it. After all his shameless pining –"

"A-Cheng."

A-Cheng blinked, his smile becoming a little more sheepish, though it didn't fade. "Would I really be his brother if I didn't enjoy this?"

She sighed, but she was unable to keep a fond smile from her face. "You shouldn't tease him when he gets back. Not until we know what happened. This will be very difficult for A-Xian."

A-Cheng pouted slightly, and Yanli's heart fell further than she expected it to as her little brother's smile disappeared. There was still glee in his eyes, a mischief she'd hardly seen since he became clan leader, and it was a look that would normally make her smile, but now it just hurt. Before she could dwell on it too much, she saw Zixuan glance over his shoulder at her from where he stood by the curtain, a familiar flare of alarm in his eyes.

Ah – one of the boys was displaying emotion, then. She eased Rulan back into A-Cheng's arms and stood up, smoothing down her skirts and walking over to the curtain. Zixuan stepped back to allow her through.

She saw at once what it was that had alarmed Zixuan – Lan Sizhui was sitting bolt upright, his eyes wide and fixed on the curtain, unfocused and unseeing. Lan Jingyi and Ouyang Zizhen knelt at either side of him, the former shaking his arm, but Sizhui looked almost catatonic. Standing by the far wall with his arms crossed tightly over his chest, Jinling was watching anxiously.

“Ah...” The word escaped her as little more than a sigh, but it made three of the boys jump almost comically. Only Sizhui didn’t move, still frozen on the spot, and Yanli smiled over her shoulder at her husband. “Zixuan, if you could please give us a minute – perhaps go and make sure A-Cheng doesn’t laugh loud enough to wake the baby. And would you get rid of that talisman for me, please?”

“Of course,” said Zixuan, a relieved smile tugging at his lips as he was given an excuse to duck out. Shaking her head fondly, Yanli let the curtain fall back across the room and knelt just opposite the boys.

“Uh, Jin-furen...” Zizhen stammered, his cheeks bright red. “It, it was an accident, we – we didn’t realise...”

Yanli smiled gently, meeting his eyes for a moment. “I know. Talismans can be temperamental – I’m sure it was an easy enough mistake to make.” She raised her voice slightly. “Lan-gongzi.”

Sizhui jumped, his eyes snapping onto her as what little colour he had left seeped out of his face. “Jin-furen... What have we done? What have I *done*?”

“It’s alright, Lan-gongzi,” she promised, smiling warmly. “It was an accident, we all know it. There’s no need to panic.”

But Sizhui shook his head desperately, his eyes somehow growing even wider. “Hanguang Jun,” he wheezed, “Hanguang Jun, Hanguang Jun’s – he –”

“Ah, Sizhui, you know Hanguang Jun’s never angry with you,” Jingyi said, smiling slightly and squeezing his shidi’s shoulder, but Lan Sizhui winced.

“He – he hardly knows me, Jingyi, and, and that’s not the point!” he choked. “He’ll be so upset – he, he likes to be private, he always keeps his feelings *private*, this – this will be a nightmare, he – he –”

“Will be just fine,” promised Yanli firmly, cutting the boy off before he could work himself into too much of a panic. “He will understand it was an accident, he won’t be too cross with you. I admit, it does seem the sort of thing Hanguang Jun would find difficult, but I can assure you he’s been through far worse. So has A-Xian.”

Lan Sizhui did not look convinced, and he shook his head slightly. “Gossip is forbidden, gossip is forbidden, this is why gossip is forbidden!” He gasped suddenly, his cheeks turning red. “If, if Lan-xiansheng’s still here, if, if Lan-xiansheng heard us *gossiping* about *Hanguang Jun* –” He broke off, hiding his face in his hands with a little moan. Beside him, Lan Jingyi had clearly just made the same connection about Lan Qiren, his eyes widening almost as much as Lan Sizhui’s.

“Lan-gongzi, I know you must feel very embarrassed, but I *truly* don’t think you need to worry too much. I don’t think *any* of you need to worry too much.” Yanli was careful to keep her voice gentle and firm, using the same tone she used when she needed her brothers to listen to her. “I can’t speak for A-Xian, or for Hanguang Jun, but I imagine it will do them

good to have a little chat about things, and I'm sure they will understand that it was an accident. Whatever happens, it will pass. One day, I'm sure, we will look back at this and laugh."

"I'm pretty sure I can hear Jiujiu laughing already," Jinling added, grinning slightly, but Sizhui flinched, and Jingyi scowled.

"Well *that's* not going to make Hanguang Jun –" Jingyi cut himself off, snapping his mouth shut.

Yanli paused, letting the pieces fall into place. "I take it A-Cheng and Hanguang Jun... did not get on well, in your time?"

Jingyi opened his mouth, but Sizhui put a hand on his arm. "Don't, Jingyi," he said, glancing at Yanli worriedly. "We don't want to stir any more trouble."

"I see," said Yanli, and Lan Sizhui blushed more fiercely as he realised that he had essentially answered the question. She said nothing, letting the pressure build just enough to coax the boy into elaborating.

"Hanguang Jun... Hanguang Jun would not speak to Jiang-zongzhu," he admitted carefully. "Before today I don't, I don't think I heard him say a single word to his face."

Jinling blinked. "Wait – is that why you two were always speaking for him?"

"Obviously," said Jingyi, frowning at him, but Jinling seemed unphased, jutting his chin up a little, a slight smirk on his face.

"Oh. I always thought it was Jingyi being impertinent."

"Well, you'd know all about impertinence wouldn't you, Young Mistress Jin?" retorted Jingyi sharply, and Jinling's eyes widened.

"You!" he cut himself off, his cheeks blazing red as he glanced at Yanli, and when Jingyi followed his gaze he looked down too.

"Boys," Yanli said patiently, in the same tone she used with A-Xian and A-Cheng, smiling to show them she wasn't really upset. She turned to Jingyi. "It's not proper to address Jinling in such a way now, Lan-gongzi – he is going by the family name of Yu. Yu-guniang would be much more polite than Jin-da-xiaojie."

A look of stunned delight fell onto Jingyi's face, and Zizhen let out a burst of laughter, covering his mouth quickly. Jinling went even redder, but Yanli smiled at him, letting the mischief shine in her eyes, and held out her hand.

"Here," she said gently. "Come and sit with us, A-Ling. You're the only one still on your feet."

Looking heartbreakingly nervous and gut-wrenchingly eager, Jinling nodded, hurrying down to sit by her side, and she drew him into a hug, pressing a kiss to his forehead. If he was as

much like A-Cheng as he seemed, he would need the extra assurance that the teasing came from a place of love. She half expected him to squirm like A-Cheng would among company, but he didn't, all but melting against her instead.

*He grew up without you*, a voice in the back of her head reminded her. It sounded painfully like her father. *He has never had this before.*

She kissed him again, smoothing back his hair, and then she turned back to the others. She was pleased to see that neither Zizhen nor Jingyi looked perturbed by the somewhat public display of affection – in fact, they both seemed much more at ease than they had when she entered the room. Sizhui, on the other hand, was not paying attention to Yanli and Jinling at all. Instead, he was staring into space again, biting at the skin on his bottom lip.

“Lan-gongzi,” she said, leaning forward and squeezing his hand. “Please, do not worry so much. I promise, it is not as bad as you think it is. Embarrassment is awful in the moment, yes, but it fades, and it becomes something to laugh about. I promise.” Sizhui looked far from convinced, but a sudden thought sprang to her mind, and she smiled. “Just look at A-Xuan. A-Ling, did your Jiujiu ever tell you about the first time your father admitted that he cared for me?”

Jinling shook his head, and Yanli let her grin grow.

“I’m not surprised,” she admitted. “It happened during the Phoenix Mountain hunt, and frankly so much went wrong that day I’m sure A-Cheng would have rather forgotten it.”

“I’ve heard of that hunt!” Zizhen said, his voice eager with earnest admiration. “It’s said that Wei-qianbei took a third of the prey, by himself!”

Yanli glanced at the young man, fondness rising within her at the open, innocent awe on his face.

“He did,” said Yanli, inclining her head. “That was part of what went wrong – some insisted he had broken the rules of the hunt. Jin Zixun –” She paused as a sharp surge of anger shot up her throat. “Well, we won’t talk about that part. That man’s had quite enough attention today, I think. But in any case, A-Xuan had asked me to go for a walk. I didn’t really know what to expect. Things had been... awkward, between us, since the engagement was broken –”

“Broken?” Jinling blurted out, looking confused. “When was the engagement broken?”

Confused herself, Yanli considered that. “A-Ling, what did they tell you of our courtship?”

Jinling shrugged a little awkwardly. “Not much... Jiujiu didn’t like talking about it much, and Xiao – well, the Jin side of the family just said that the marriage was arranged when you were both infants, but that it became a great love match. Jiujiu would sometimes say something about it being a miracle that A-Die ever got anywhere, but only when he was drunk.”

“That sounds like A-Cheng,” Yanli said, sighing fondly. A flutter of sorrow stirred in her heart as she realised that really, it made sense no one spoke about the complications of her



courtship with Zixuan – their deaths would have turned it from an amusing love story to nothing less than a tragedy.

And that was how she found herself recounting everything from A-Xian and A-Xuan's fight at Cloud Recess to the disastrous confession at the Phoenix Mountain hunt. She skirted around the serious parts of the story, painting even the awful soup incident as something to be laughed at – and the boys did laugh. Especially later, when she mentioned how Zixuan darted into the woods like a startled deer after his confession, and when she gave her best impression of his face. There, even Lan Sizhui and A-Ling snickered.

"I was just as hopeless, of course," she said, putting a hand on her heart. "Heaven knows I hadn't a clue how to act around A-Xuan, I must have looked like a startled rabbit most of the time..." She smiled, letting her words trail off into a calm quiet, and glanced down at Jinling. "I'm glad that we figured it out in the end." Jinling smiled, and Yanli reached out to stroke his hair again. It was still a little hard to believe he was here, that he was so grown up... "Now – I do think it would do you all good to actually get some rest. Perhaps less gossiping and more sleeping this time, hm?"

The four boys nodded guiltily, but now their faces were more sheepish than they were afraid, and she knew that she had done her job.

"Thank you, Jin-furen," said Sizhui, and Yanli hesitated for a moment.

"Lan-gongzi, we are to be family," she said softly. "In fact by some rights, you are already my nephew. There's no need to be so formal. For now, you may call me Yanli – or Jiang Yanli, if that is too familiar. That goes for all of you." She paused, smiling down at her son. "Apart from you, of course, A-Ling. We'll have to figure out what to say in public, but here and now A-Niang is more than alright."

Jinling gave a little smile, shuffling slightly closer to her. "Okay, A-Niang."

"If, if you're sure, Jiang Yanli," Sizhui said hesitantly, and she nodded at him.

"I would not have offered if I was not," she promised, smiling.

The boy hesitated for a moment. "In... in that case, please call me Sizhui, if you'd like."

"You just can use our courtesy names too!" said Zizhen with an endearing eagerness, jerking his head towards Jingyi, who nodded. "For now at least, until we figure out exactly who's calling who what."

Yanli smiled, bowing her head slightly. "Thank you. Now, before you think too much on this you really should get some sleep. I mean it." She looked fondly at Jinling and smiled, kissing his forehead. He leant towards her a little, and Yanli moved on instinct, wrapping her arms around him and pulling him close. With a small sound that could almost be a sob, Jinling pressed his face against her shoulder, shuddering slightly. For a long moment she held him, rocking just ever so slightly, and then she pulled away, standing up. "Alright now, come on. Into bed, all of you."

The four boys obeyed, and Yanli ducked out of the room, letting the curtain fall back behind her and heading out into the main part of the cave. The Lans had come back inside, as had Wen Qing and Wen Ning, and they were speaking quietly by the door with Zixuan. A-Cheng was still sitting down, and still grinning wildly, whispering to the baby in his arms – no doubt about how much trouble A-Xian was in, if she went by the look on his face.

When she noticed Yanli, Wen Qing bowed her head. A-Yuan was on her hip, his head resting against her shoulder, though he was awake again.

“Wei Wuxian ran off into the Burial Mounds,” Wen Qing told Yanli, resigned exasperation on her face. Still, Yanli thought she could see just a little spark of amusement in the other woman’s eyes. “Hanguang Jun walked quite swiftly in the opposite direction.”

A-Cheng started snickering again, though when Yanli looked at him he schooled his face into a most unconvincing expression of solemnity and focused on rocking the baby in his arms.

“Is that safe?” Yanli asked Wen Qing, worry curling up within her. “To run off into the Burial Mounds...”

“Yes. He won’t go outside the wards,” promised Wen Qing. “Even Wei Wuxian knows better than that.”

“Don’t go near the wards without a grownup,” A-Yuan mumbled sleepily. “Qing-jiejie, did, did Rich-gege go to find Xian – to find A-Die? It’s, it’s nearly bedtime?”

“With any luck,” said Wen Qing to A-Yuan, kissing his forehead. “They’ll be back soon enough. Shall we go and find Popo?”

A-Yuan shook his head with a little sigh. “A-Yuan wait for A-Die.”

Yanli was not sure she’d ever seen anything quite so adorable, unless it was perhaps A-Yuan’s earlier gleeful cry of ‘*A-Die!*’ as he’d thrown his chubby little arms around A-Xian’s neck. Love grew strong and warm in her heart, solidifying her new nephew’s place there forever.

“We thought we might wait a little while too, in case Wangji wants to spend the night in Yiling after all,” said Lu Meilin, smiling wryly and shifting Lan Yu on her hip. Her eyes darted to Lan Qiren, who was staring at the far wall as though he was hoping it might swallow him whole, and her smile grew into a smirk. Yanli hid her own grin behind her sleeve.

The door eased open, and the woman A-Xian called Popo came back inside carrying a tray stacked with bowls and spoons. Behind her was the man A-Xian had introduced as simply Sishu, and he too was carrying a tray, though a larger one, this one bearing a steaming cook pot and a plate of fruit.

“We’ve brought some dinner,” said Popo to Wen Qing, glancing around the room. “Ah, Weigongzi?”

“Did you hear?” asked Wen Qing, and the old lady nodded sombrely. The man, on the other hand, gave little laugh, though he turned his face away as he did.

“See Rulan?” Jiang Cheng whispered gleefully, quiet enough that Yanli only barely heard him. “It’s *funny!*”

“He’s gone for a walk,” said Wen Qing to the newcomers. “I would say to clear his head, but...”

“Is it ever clear?” Sishu said, and though Yanli’s instinct was to bristle protectively there was such fondness on the man’s face that she felt a swell of affection towards him instead. It eased her heart a little to know that A-Xian had been living among people who knew him and cared for him.

“No,” said A-Cheng bluntly, his eyes breaking away from the baby for a moment to grin wryly at Sishu. “It isn’t.”

The man looked at A-Cheng with a cautious smile, and he nodded slightly, before holding up the tray. “We’ll just pop this down and let you get back to it. We, er, weren’t sure how many would be eating, and A-Ning’s the best the cook among us so I’m afraid it’s not much, but...”

At once, Yanli’s heart dropped. Yet another thing she hadn’t had time to fully process was the way her brother and his Wens had been living in the Burial Mounds – what she had seen was more than enough to tell her it was a difficult life at best. Their clothes simple and worn, and A-Xian’s cheeks were too hollow for him to have really been eating well. He looked tired, too, though admittedly that may have been due to the whirlwind of a day they had had or the loss of his golden core. But by the look of the place and the people in it, it was a far cry from any sort of life that Yanli had ever lived, and it was a thought that made her a little sick.

Especially now, when the Wen were offering more of what little food they had.

The Wen, who in another life had presented themselves at Jinlintai, and walked knowingly to their own deaths, to protect her baby brother.

Yanli felt tears sting at the back of her eyes, but she blinked them away and bowed low, ignoring Popo’s startled gasp and stammered protest.

“Thank you,” she said, coming out of the bow. “Whatever it is, it is more than enough. We cannot thank you enough for your kindness, and for taking care of our A-Xian. Will you eat with us?”

Popo and Sishu glanced at each other, and then at her, and then the man shook his head slightly. “We have already eaten, Jin-furen. But, please – there is no need to thank us. Weigongzi saved our lives – doing what we can to help him is the very least we can do.”

Though Yanli wanted to ask them to stay anyway, she suspected it might make them more uncomfortable, so she just smiled. “Regardless, it is a comfort to me to see my brother cared for. And I thank you again for the food, we truly appreciate it.”

Before Popo could say anything in return, A-Xian appeared at the door, his cheeks slightly pink, and his hand in Lan Wangji's. Hanguang Jun's ears were very red, and he was looking straight ahead as though carefully avoiding eye contact with anyone, and Yanli fought the urge to squeal with delight.

Truthfully, she had known how much A-Xian liked Lan Wangji since their days in Cloud Recess, and ever since the war she had been almost certain that his feelings were reciprocated. She would always remember the distress in Lan Wangji's eyes after the final battle, when he had quietly requested to play his guqin for the unconscious A-Xian, and then the look on his face days later, when A-Xian had woken up. Their admitting their feelings for each other was something she had been waiting years for, and she was so excited that –

"If you say a single word, Jiang Cheng, I will drown you in the blood pool," said A-Xian cheerfully.

"A-Die!" A-Yuan cried happily, holding out his arms, and A-Xian let go of Lan Wangji's hand to reach for him. Something softened in Hanguang Jun's face as he watched, and Yanli could not keep from smiling.

"A-Yuan!" A-Xian returned in the same tone the boy had used, nuzzling his nose. "What are you doing awake? It's time for little radishes to go to bed!"

A-Yuan gave an adorable calculating frown, and then shook his head. "But A-Yuan's not a radish. It's not time for A-Yuan's to go to bed yet."

"Ah, well, that explains it," said A-Xian seriously. Yanli could see the reluctance with which he looked up away from his son and at the others in the room, his blush deepening. "Uh, Lan-xiansheng, Lu-qianbei, you're... still here..."

"Quite without need, I see," said Lu Meilin, grinning, and Lan Wangji's ears grew even redder. "We weren't sure if Wangji would want to return to Yiling after all, but it seems that will be unnecessary."

Lan Wangji inclined his head. "Thank you," he said, a little awkwardly, and Yanli had to cover her mouth with her hand for a moment. Really, this was just too adorable.

"In that case we will take our leave. I do not think we require an escort to the gate, thank you," said Lan Qiren sharply, bowing to the room and turning to stride out of the door with such speed it was a fraction close to impolite. "Meilin."

Lu Meilin's grin grew, shifting A-Yu on her hip and bowing. "We shall see you tomorrow. Good evening, everyone," she said, her eyes shining, and then she nodded meaningfully at Hanguang Jun. "Good evening, Wangji."

Impossibly, Lan Wangji's ears grew even redder, and he bowed. Lu Meilin turned, heading out of the door, and as she left A-Yu clambered up so he was half hanging over her shoulder.

"Goodnight A-Yuan!" he cried, waving enthusiastically. "I'll, I'll see you tomorrow!"

A-Yuan blinked, looking a little bit taken aback by A-Yu's enthusiasm, but A-Xian jogged him gently on his hip, pressing a kiss to his hair, and with the encouragement A-Yuan smiled, raising his little hand to wave at A-Yu.

"Bye-bye A-Yu," he called, and after a moment's consideration he added a little, "come back soon!"

A-Yu beamed so brightly that Yanli almost melted. "I will, I promise!"

With that, the Lans disappeared, and A-Yuan looked up at A-Xian, a very serious look on his face. "A-Die's staying."

Yanli saw a flicker of pain cross her brother's face, but he hid it quickly behind a soft smile.

"Of course A-Die's staying," he promised, and A-Yuan gave a satisfied nod, snuggling closer to him. A-Xian's eyes flickered up to Lan Wangji, who gave a small smile – one that was nevertheless brighter than any expression Yanli had seen from him before. It was a beautiful moment, and so of course that was when A-Cheng cleared his throat, doing his very best to ruin it.

"So are you then?" he demanded, his eyes sparkling with mischief. "Courting, I mean? We're still waiting, Xianxian."

At once, Lan Wangji's face shifted to glare at A-Cheng, and A-Xian opened his mouth, but then he froze, and his eyes widened, and then he laughed.

"Uh, Lan Zhan...?" he said, and Lan Wangji's eyes widened a fraction.

"We... did not discuss it," Lan Wangji said finally.

"I'm going to go with yes?" hazarded A-Xian, beaming as Lan Wangji gave a little nod. "Then yes, we are courting."

A-Cheng shook his head in disbelief. "What the hell were you talking about, then?"

"Oh, we can't tell you that. There are children present, and even if there weren't, you're not married, Chengcheng," said A-Xian sagely. "It would burn your innocent little ears."

"Wei Ying," Lan Wangji chided, as A-Cheng let out a strangled noise of disgust.

"Shameless!" He scowled. "You're not married yet either, Wei Wuxian! If you bring dishonour on the Jiang Clan before you're even officially back I swear I'm throwing you off the end of the pier."

"Bold of you to assume you'll be able to after I've drowned you in the blood pool," A-Xian retorted, but A-Cheng cut him off.

"You can't drown me in the blood pool, I'm holding a baby!" He held up Rulan slightly for emphasis.

“I’m holding a baby!” cried A-Xian in mock-outrage.

“A-Yuan’s not a baby, A-Yuan’s a big boy,” protested A-Yuan, in much more genuine outrage.

“Boys,” Yanli said firmly, though she couldn’t keep the fond smile from her lips. She had, perhaps let them go on for a little too long, but it had been so long since she’d seen them argue like this, and the fact that A-Cheng was doing so in front of Wen Qing and Wen Ning was, in her opinion, a very good sign. These people were A-Xian’s family, now, and it was a comfort to think that A-Cheng was willing to let them see Jiang Cheng, and not just Jiang-zongzhu. Even so, “Our time-travellers are trying to sleep.”

A-Cheng’s eyes widened slightly, and he nodded, but A-Xian gave a ‘hmph,’ jogging A-Yuan on his hip.

“Well, if they were woken up, I think it serves them right,” he said, a frown of disapproval that he almost definitely did not mean on his face. “Don’t you agree, A-Yuan?”

“A-Yuan is a big boy,” A-Yuan said firmly, mirroring A-Xian’s expression.

“Uh, no,” A-Xian said, shaking his head. “No, A-Yuan as a big boy is causing A-Die problems. A-Yuan had better stay as a little radish.”

“A-Xian,” said Yanli, a little more firmly, as little A-Yuan frowned, clearly trying to make sense of the words. “It was an accident. They just mixed up the symbols on a talisman - they *meant* to make sure we wouldn’t hear anything, and they feel quite terrible enough, so you’re not to tease them about this.”

A-Xian opened his mouth, but she raised her eyebrows at him, and he ducked his chin meekly. “Yes, Shijie.”

“A-Die?” A-Yuan asked, sounding slightly wounded. “A-Yuan didn’t mean to make problems.”

“You did not make any,” said Lan Wangji firmly. “Your A-Die is being silly.”

“Lan Zhan!” A-Xian put his hand against his chest. “So cruel. But no, A-Yuan *you* haven’t made any problems at all – you are perfect. Just promise me that you’ll never grow up to shout out my secrets to the whole world, hm?”

A-Yuan looked a little confused, but then he nodded, the worry clearing from his face. Evidently, the little one was used to her brother’s dramatics. “Promise.”

“A-Xian, your friends have been so kind as to provide us with a meal – it would be polite to eat before it gets cold,” said Yanli, pointing towards the table.

“Yes, Shijie,” A-Xian said again, grabbing Lan Wangji’s hand again and pulling him over to the table. Wen Qing, Wen Ning, and Zixuan followed more sedately, the latter two wearing adorably identical awkward expressions, though Wen Qing just looked wryly amused. Yanli

crossed over to A-Cheng, holding out her hands for her son. A-Cheng's eyes narrowed slightly, and he looked suspiciously at A-Xian.

Yanli sighed. "A-Cheng, A-Xian is not going to drown you in the Blood Pool tonight. If he does it would likely wake Jinling and the others and that would make me most upset."

A-Cheng still looked reluctant as he surrendered the baby, but then he always pouted when his turn to cuddle Rulan ended. Rulan gave a little protest of his own at being jostled about, but Yanli shushed him gently and pressed a kiss to his forehead, and he settled quickly enough.

"You're doing so well, Rulan," she murmured quietly, and he stared up at her. He would need feeding again soon, and frankly it was a small miracle that he hadn't already wailed the cave down. He could be a fussy little thing, though Yanli could never really bring herself to mind it. Not when it reminded her so much of her fussy little brothers.

A lump rose in her throat. In another life, this baby would already be wearing mourning white. She looked up at Zixuan, blinking back tears, and found that he was looking back at her, his lips pursed tightly. He moved to get up, but she shook her head slightly, walking over to sit beside him. His arm wound around her waist, pulling her close, and she smiled sadly as he pressed his lips to her hair.

"I'm here," he murmured, too quiet for anyone else to hear, and she nodded, swallowing.

"I know," she whispered, closing her eyes for a moment. "I know."

## Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed that chapter! It was really interesting to write from Yanli's perspective, but much trickier than some of the others, so I hope I did her justice. I quite like how it turned out! Please do let me know what you think, and until next time, take care!

# Chapter 17

## Chapter Notes

Thank you for your lovely comments, kudos and bookmarks! I hope you enjoy this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It took Zixuan a moment to realise where he was when he woke up. His back ached, and his right arm was asleep, pins and needles tingling his fingers. When he peeled his eyes open, he saw Yanli asleep beside him, her head pillowed on his arm. Normally that wouldn't be enough to cut off his circulation, but they were in a bed much smaller than usual, and the position was odd.

Ah yes. He was in the house adjacent to the so called 'Demon Subdue Palace' in the Burial Mounds, sleeping in Wen Qing's rickety excuse for a bed – one barely big enough for one person, let alone two. Just to the right, his baby was asleep in a box.

A box.

“Ah, Shijie!” Wei Wuxian had cried as he hoisted A-Yuan up on his hip, ready to take the boy to bed. “We don't have anywhere for Rulan to sleep – we don't have a crib, or, or anything! A-Yuan's bed's still a bit too big for him, let alone a baby.”

The best the Wen had been able to come up with was a wooden box filled with blankets, and it would be a lie to say that Jin Zixuan had not balked at the idea of his son sleeping in such state. But Yanli had just smiled wearily, and thanked Wen Qing so gratefully that he couldn't really say anything about it.

And so, the precious heir to the Jin Clan had spent the night in an old wooden box – but it was also another night spent with both his parents. One more night than Jinling had ever had.

For that, a single night in a wooden box was a small price to pay.

Sighing softly, Jin Zixuan took a moment to let the events of the day before crash down upon him again. So much had happened, so many unbelievable and horrible and remarkable things, all condensed the span of a single day. To think, when he woke up yesterday morning, his biggest worry had been Zixun failing to hold his tongue and upsetting Wei Wuxian (and therefore Yanli) at the ceremony.

Instead, he had discovered that his clan had more blood on its hands than he could ever have imagined.



The way A-Yuan had screamed when he saw Jin Zixuan would haunt him until the day he died. The sheer terror on the child's face, his desperate, wrenching pleas for his Xian-gege's life – his complete and unyielding belief that Zixuan would hurt him and his family.

In that moment, Jin Zixuan realised the rot in his clan was worse than he had ever imagined. It wasn't so much that he had doubted that the Wen had been mistreated before – it made shame curl in his gut to admit it, even in the privacy of his own head, but the truth was that he had never really thought about it. The Wen were prisoners of war, and other members of his clan were dealing with them. According to his father, it had nothing to do with Zixuan, and Zixuan had been perfectly happy with that.

Even when Wei Wuxian broke the Wens out of prison, he hadn't thought much of it – frankly, he didn't understand much about what was happening with Wei Wuxian these days, and he had always been content to keep himself out of things that weren't his business.

But Zixuan had never thought that Wei Wuxian might have taken the prisoners from Qionggui Pass because they were truly being abused to such a horrific extent. He didn't think a prison camp would be a happy place, of course, but he had believed in the honour of his clan.

He had not thought for a second that there might have been children there.

It hadn't even entered his worst nightmares to think that people in his clan, people in his *family* could go to such a place and abuse the prisoners in the ways he had heard of today – he had never imagined that Zixun could –

He had been blind – but no, that wasn't quite right. If he had been blind, there might be less shame in it. Jin Zixuan had not been blind.

He simply hadn't opened his eyes.

He would not make that mistake again. He had decided as much when they were talking to the Wens, had sworn a silent oath that he would try. If this mess could be solved – when this mess was solved – he would never close his eyes again.

He would do everything he could, give everything he was, to make sure that this never happened again.

For the first time in his life, Jin Zixuan was sorely tempted to cede from the clan altogether, the shame of what his people had done and what he had allowed to happen goading him to do as Mianmian had and cast the Jin Clan away like dirty clothing. But he couldn't. If things went their way, if they were truly able to bring his father and cousin and brother to justice, someone would need to step in to make sure the next head of Lanling Jin changed the clan's direction.

Of course, Jin Zixuan still had absolutely no clue what he was doing. So far, he didn't seem to have made any *terrible* mistakes, though when he had first brought up the Stygian Tiger Amulet there had been a moment when he thought Wei Wuxian might throw the thing at his head.

He blinked the sleep from his eyes, gazing at Yanli. Even now, her brow was furrowed slightly, as though she was concerned even in her sleep, and Zixuan frowned. Yesterday had taken a toll on her. As the evening wore on, he'd seen her find it harder to keep her shoulders from slumping slightly, to keep the strain of worry and weariness from her face. The worst had been when Wei Wuxian disappeared to put A-Yuan to bed, and Wen Qing and Wen Ning cleared the dishes away, leaving Yanli, Zixuan, Jiang Cheng and Lan Wangji alone with their thoughts. Zixuan had been so caught up in his own mind he hadn't noticed the tears in Yanli's eyes until a split second before Wei Wuxian came flying back into the cave.

When he had seen the four of them alone, Wei Wuxian had balked, spinning around to confront Wen Qing, who had come in after him.

"Where were you? You can't just leave Lan Zhan with these three right now!"

Zixuan had thought the withering glare Wen Qing sent Wei Wuxian quite impressive. "What are you talking about, Wei Wuxian?"

Frowning – or perhaps more accurately pouting – Wei Wuxian had flopped down beside Lan Wangji, who to his credit looked just as confused as Zixuan felt. "Lan Zhan – they didn't say anything terrible did they? I mean Shijie wouldn't do anything terrible, but she can be scary when she wants to."

"We don't need to threaten Hanguang Jun," Jiang Cheng had scoffed, rolling his eyes. "It's your lack of honour and restraint I'm worried about, not his."

Wei Wuxian had pouted further. "Chengcheng, what about my heart?"

"If he breaks it I'll break his legs. I thought that was obvious."

To be honest, Zixuan had thought that a fair assumption – he had, to his great shame, broken Yanli's heart twice, and won a punch to the face and a broken rib for his troubles. Thinking back, he was pretty sure that Lan Wangji had been there both times.

The bickering of her brother's had chased the tears from Yanli's eyes, but they returned later, after Wen Qing had shown them to her small room, and left them there alone. Zixuan had expected it. He'd waited for her to settle Rulan down in his little wooden box, and then he had held her close as she muffled her sobs in his shoulder. Broken and mangled words came out here and there among the sobs, her fear and grief breaking out of her, and Zixuan had waited patiently for them to run their course.

Silently, he had shed a few tears of his own while Yanli's face was hidden in his shoulder. Eventually, Yanli had become still and quiet against his chest, trying shakily to steady her breath. Gently, he'd pulled her into his lap, holding her close.

"I'm not going anywhere, A-Li. I'm here," he had whispered. "You're going to be fine. I'm going to keep you and Jinling and Rulan safe, and we're all going to be fine." He hesitated a moment, and then lowered his voice further. "And just to make you happy, I'll even do my best to keep your annoying little brothers alive, too."

Just as he'd expected, the words had drawn a half-hearted glare from Yanli.

"Be nice."

"I am being very nice," Zixuan had innocently, and Yanli sighed – but she had also smiled.

"You're as bad as they are," Yanli had murmured fondly, and Zixuan had winced, pressing a hand to his chest to put on a show of offence, as though they didn't both know that a comparison to her brothers was one of the highest compliments Yanli would ever offer.

It had taken him some time to get there, true, but Jin Zixuan knew how to look after his wife.

"A-Xuan," she murmured, jolting him out of his memories of the night before, and he blinked.

"I didn't realise you were awake," he said softly as she opened her eyes, looking at him wearily. "It can't be dawn yet, A-Li. Hanguang Jun said he'd wake us then." He leant a little closer, kissing her. "Go back to sleep."

"I've been awake for a while," she said softly. "Zixuan... Can... can I tell you something?"

"Of course," he murmured, worry growing heavy on his chest. "What's wrong?"

Her eyes, still a little red and swollen from the night before, filled with fresh tears, and her lip quivered. She sat up, drawing her knees up and resting her head on them, and Zixuan bolted upright, ignoring the way his still-sleeping right arm hung limply at his side. He took her hand with his left, squeezing it tight. It was very cold.

"A-Li, what's wrong?"

"It's A-Xian," she whispered, meeting his eyes slowly. "He... A-Xuan, he – he thinks he's worth so much less than us. All of us. I – I kept dreaming about – And he never told me. He never told me, he just – he just thought he had to deal with it all on his own, and, and I'm supposed to be his big sister, A-Xuan, I'm, I'm supposed to look after him and I... I..."

A lump rose in Zixuan's throat, and he nodded slowly. "But you're here now. We can't change what's happened already, A-Li. And Wei Wuxian... He knows that you love him. Even I can see that. He knows you love him."

Yanli closed her eyes tightly, leaning against him. "The things he – the things he thought he had to do, the things he's done for – the world has hurt him so badly, A-Xuan and I – I can't take it."

Zixuan wrapped his arms around her, wincing slightly against the pins and needles still tingling in his hands, pulling her close. "Is this about what he said to you and Jiang Cheng? When Lan Wangji and I were outside?" She nodded against his chest with a small sob. "If it's a secret, you don't have to tell me," he murmured.

"We, we have to look after him," she insisted, pressing her face into his chest. "A-Xuan, A-Xuan we have to look after him."

“We will,” he promised. “I told you last night that I’ll do what I can to protect your brothers, and I meant it.”

She looked up at him tearfully. “I know you two don’t get along, but —”

“I’ll try,” he promised, putting just a hint of teasing into his voice. “I was good yesterday, wasn’t I?”

Yanli sniffed slightly, a little smile on her face. “You were,” she murmured. She sighed, closing her eyes again.

“Are you sure you don’t want to go back to sleep?” Zixuan asked quietly, running a hand over her hair, but she shook her head.

“Dawn won’t be far off, I’m sure. And Rulan will need a feed soon,” she said, sighing softly. “I must say, after last night I am exceedingly grateful that the wet nurse usually takes the night shift.”

“I only wish I could help, but unfortunately I’m ill-equipped,” Jin Zixuan admitted, a small smile coming to his lips. “You’re a good mother, A-Li.”

She raised her eyebrows, without opening her eyes. “Oh?”

“You are,” he insisted. “You’re going to be wonder—” He froze.

“A-Xuan?” Yanli asked, pulling away slightly and frowning at him. “A-Xuan, what’s wrong?”

“Uh, nothing,” he murmured, blinking and shaking his head slightly. He grinned wryly at her. “It’s just... Well, I just realised that I have no idea how to parent a teenager. I expected we’d have a decent number of years of parenting a child under our belt before he’d have to deal with that.”

Yanli blinked, and then gave a breathless laugh. “Oh... I – I hadn’t thought about it like that... We’re going to have to adapt our parenting method, A-Xuan.”

Zixuan laughed softly. “Yes. Something tells me Jinling needs a little more than being fed, changed, and rocked to sleep.”

“Mm,” Yanli agreed, a thoughtful look on her face. “I hate to say it, but I think he’s a little too big for me to rock to sleep.” Zixuan snorted, but then Yanli’s face grew more serious. “He’s been through so much, A-Xuan. He’s been through so much and we haven’t been there, and he... He’s so grown up, but he’s still so *young* and he... how do we help him? How *will* we look after him?”

Trying not to wince, Zixuan took a deep breath. “I don’t know. But we will. And he’ll be okay, A-Li. We’ll make sure of it.”

Yanli shivered, but nodded. A lump grew in Zixuan’s throat, and he closed his eyes.

“I love you, A-Li,” he murmured, hugging her tighter and pressing his lips to her hair. “I love you so much.”

“I love you too,” she breathed, shifting onto her knees to wrap her arms around his neck and press a kiss to his lips. Pain shone in her eyes as she looked at him. “A-Xuan, I – yesterday I – I love you so much and if you, if –” She broke off, shaking her head, and her lip began to quiver. “Just... please... don’t leave me, okay?”

“I’ll do everything in my power not to,” he swore, cradling her face in his hands. “But you can’t leave me, either.”

She gave a watery smile and nodded. “Okay.”

A moment later, Rulan gave a little whimper, and then a spluttering cry, and Yanli wiped her eyes, nodding slightly.

“Time to get going then,” Yanli said, moving over to lift Rulan into her arms. “Good morning, my darling. Are you hungry?”

Rulan wailed, and Yanli laughed softly, settling herself on the edge of the bed and setting him to feed. Zixuan stood up, grabbing his outer robe from the side and shrugging it on.

“I’ll go and see what time it is, and if I can’t find you something to eat,” he said, and Yanli smiled gratefully.

“Thank you, my love,” she murmured, and he left Wen Qing’s small room.

The door took him straight outside the little house into the chill morning of the Burial Mounds. It was dark, but he had the feeling that dawn wasn’t far off, and he could see a little light coming out of the open door to the Demon Subdue Palace, so he made his way inside.

Lan Wangji was meditating before a small fire, though he opened his eyes as Zixuan came in. Beside him, Sizhui was sipping at a cup of water, pausing to smile warmly and bow his head at Zixuan as he entered. Jingyi was at his side, also in a meditation pose, but his head was nodding, and Zixuan got the impression that the boy had fallen asleep.

Not that Zixuan blamed him. After everything that had happened over the last few days (in the boys’ reckoning, at least) he was sure they were all exhausted. Frankly, Zixuan was exhausted himself, and he’d barely experienced half of it.

Over by the wall, Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng were still asleep, curled up on Wei Wuxian’s bed. There’d been some debate last night between Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng over who would sleep in the bed, with the former protesting that the great Hanguang Jun couldn’t sleep on the floor while the latter hissed about Wei Wuxian’s shamelessness and reminded him that he and Lan Wangji were not married, and were therefore *not* under any circumstances to be sharing a bed, especially when Jiang Cheng would be sleeping on the floor in the same room, did he have no sense of shame?! So Wei Wuxian had declared that as guests, Lan Wangji and Jiang Cheng should have the bed then, and he would sleep on the floor, at which point Lan Wangji had gone very still, and Jiang Cheng had turned the same shade of purple as his robes.

Lan Wangji had cut off Jiang Cheng's spluttering protest to say that he had spent the night on the floor in worse caves than this, and that as brothers there was nothing wrong with Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng sharing the bed, so that was clearly the best option. Then, to Zixuan's delight, he had taken a blanket from the box Wen Qing had brought out, sat against the wall and tucked the blanket over his lap, and closed his eyes. Of course, this left Jiang Cheng and Wei Wuxian to take the bed.

In a stark contrast to their bickering of the night before, now the two brothers were snuggled together, and it somehow made them both look very young. Jiang Cheng was half sprawled across Wei Wuxian's chest, his face resting over his brother's heart, and his arm slung up over his brother's shoulder. Wei Wuxian was using the hand of that arm as a pillow, while his own arms cuddled Jiang Cheng close.

Zixuan was greatly tempted to duck out of the door and run to get Yanli. He knew how much she would love to see this – but he also knew that interrupting breakfast would make Rulan cry up a storm, and that would wake everyone up, and likely ruin the moment.

So, promising himself to describe it to her later, he turned his attention to the Lans instead.

"Good morning," he murmured, careful to keep his voice quiet as he stifled a yawn.

"Good morning, Jin-gongzi," said Sizhui softly, and Lan Wangji inclined his head.

"I take it Jinling and Zizhen are still asleep, too?" Zixuan hazarded, and Sizhui nodded.

"Not for long, I don't think," he whispered. "Hanguang Jun said we're supposed to wake everyone up at dawn, and it's almost time."

Something tensed in Lan Wangji's face for a moment, but Zixuan didn't know the other man well enough to be able to guess what it was, so he didn't try.

Instead, he said, "Do you know where I might find something for A-Li to eat?"

"No," said Lan Wangji, "but Wei Ying will. Sizhui is right – the sun will rise soon." With that, he stood up, striding over to the bed and putting a hand on Wei Wuxian's shoulder. Then, he raised his voice a little. "Wei Ying."

Wei Wuxian shifted, opening bleary eyes, and Jiang Cheng groaned in protest, still mostly asleep, judging by the way he nestled even closer to his brother.

"Lan Zhan," Wei Wuxian murmured, smiling sleepily. "You're in my bedroom. How shameless."

"There is only one room," said Lan Wangji. "It's almost dawn. Your sister needs breakfast."

"Ah," said Wei Wuxian, rubbing at his eyes and yawning. "Well, if it's for Shijie..." He glanced down at Jiang Cheng, a fond smile on his face. "Jiang Cheng," he said softly. "Wake up." The moment was so tender that Zixuan felt almost like he was interrupting, until Wei Wuxian prodded his brother hard in the cheek. "Jiang Cheng!"

“Ow!” The arm that – until less than a moment ago – had served as Wei Wuxian’s pillow now smacked at his face as Jiang Cheng flailed into consciousness, a scowl forming on his face before he’d even fully opened his eyes. “Wei Wuxian!”

“I need to get breakfast for Shijie,” Wei Wuxian said unapologetically. “And I can’t do that with you lying on my chest. I’m glad I make a good pillow, though.”

“You don’t. Too bony,” Jiang Cheng grumbled, sitting up at rubbing at his eyes. His gaze fell on Zixuan and Sizhui, and he stiffened. “Wonderful. We have an audience.”

Wei Wuxian looked up too, apparently noticing Zixuan for the first time. Zixuan counted it a point in his favour that Wei Wuxian merely rolled his eyes.

“Ah, is it really the end of the world for them to know how much you love me, Jiang Cheng?” he teased, sitting up and bumping his shoulder against his brother’s. “Sizhui and Zixuan are both fairly new to brotherhood – and we’re not going to start talking about Zixuan’s first acknowledged brother right now because it’s not wise to use Demonic Cultivation on an empty stomach and if I think about what he’s done I’m going to break something.”

“Wei Ying,” Lan Wangji said, frowning slightly, and Wei Wuxian waved a hand blithely, swinging his legs out of bed.

“The point,” he said as he stood up, “is that Sizhui and Zixuan don’t know how true, brotherly love should really look. And I’m not sure Lan Zhan does either – he and Zewu Jun never seem to argue or hit each other, and that can’t be healthy.”

Wei Wuxian looked to regret the words the moment they came out of his mouth, and even Zixuan could see the flash of pain on Lan Wangji’s face.

“Oh... I’m sorry, Lan Zhan,” Wei Wuxian smiled weakly. “I need to learn to think before I speak, hm? But we’ll find him, if your elders haven’t found him already, okay?”

Lan Wangji nodded once, and then he glanced down, the tips of his ears going ever so slightly pink. “Get dressed.”

Wei Wuxian glanced down at his underrobe and then laughed slightly. “Right – clothes, then food for Shijie. Peacock, do you know how to cook?”

“I do not,” said Zixuan smoothly. Yanli had, in fact, been teaching him, and he treasured the lessons, but he was not nearly secure enough in his skills to admit to having any.

“Okay, well, apparently neither can I, and it doesn’t usually stop me, but Shijie has asked me very nicely to please never cook for her again-”

“Because she doesn’t want to get her tastebuds burnt off,” said Jiang Cheng, yawning. “Or to be poisoned to death.”

“Jiang Cheng!” Wei Wuxian pouted, and Lan Wangji glared at Jiang Cheng.

“That’s fair, Wei-qianbei,” mumbled Jingyi, his eyes still closed. “That congee nearly killed me.”

“Uh huh,” said Wei Wuxian. “Well, you nearly embarrassed me to death yesterday, so I’d say we’re equal.”

Lan Jingyi’s eyes snapped open and he bit down on his lip, glancing at Sizhui, who had winced and looked down at his hands.

“As if that’s possible,” Jiang Cheng scoffed, getting out of bed and tugging his outer robes on. “If it was possible to die from embarrassment, being your brother would’ve killed me years ago.”

Silently, Zixuan agreed that Jiang Cheng was probably correct – if only because if it in fact *was* possible to die of embarrassment, Jin Zixuan would never have survived the Phoenix Mountain hunt. It was the memory of his disastrous attempt to confess to Yanli that had snapped him out of his astonishment long enough to go in and take down the talisman last night. That, and the terrifying blankness of Lan Wangji’s face as he’d rushed out with A-Yuan, ignoring Yanli’s soft calls after him.

However, Jiang Cheng’s words did not look to comfort the two young Lans. Jingyi bowed his head, his hands disappearing up into his sleeves, and Sizhui looked guiltily up at Wei Wuxian.

“I’m so sorry, Wei-qianbei,” he said in a small voice. “I – I really didn’t mean to, I – I wanted to make sure that no one would hear, but – but I – I messed up the talisman and I’m so sorry. I – I know I shouldn’t’ve even said anything in the first place but I was just confused and worried and – Wei-qianbei I’m so sorry!” By the end of it, there were tears in Lan Sizhui’s eyes, and he looked so distraught that Zixuan thought he understood why Yanli had ordered her brother not to tease the time-travellers about this the night before.

Based on the way Wei Wuxian’s smile flickered, he guessed that the other man did, too.

“Ah, Sizhui,” he said with a crooked smile. “Don’t worry about it too much. We survived, and I got to see Lan-xiansheng turn an excellent shade of purple, which is always a good – wait, no, it’s okay!”

At the mention of Lan Qiren, Sizhui had buried his face in his hands.

Wei Wuxian clicked his tongue, crouching down in front of Sizhui and tugging his hands away gently. “Hey, I mean it – don’t worry about. We’re not angry at you, A-Yuan. And Lan-xiansheng is going to be far too furious at me to have any spare outrage for you, okay? Accidents happen. Okay?”

A little hesitantly, Sizhui nodded, and Wei Wuxian grinned again.

“Good.” He paused, and then frowned up at Lan Wangji. “I thought you were going to tell them they weren’t in trouble when you woke up, Lan Zhan?”



“I did,” said Lan Wangji. “And then you said they nearly embarrassed you to death.”

“I am still planning a marvellous revenge,” Wei Wuxian said, wagging his finger at the two boys with a mischievous grin. “Just you wait. You think that congee was bad...”

Jingyi grinned, and Sizhui gave a small little smile.

“Wei Ying,” Lan Wangji said, with the clear tone of someone circling back to the point at hand. “Wake the Wens. I will make breakfast. Where is the kitchen?”

Wei Wuxian blinked. “You can cook?”

“I am passable,” said Lan Wangji. “I will not poison anyone.”

“Okay,” said Wei Wuxian, nodding. He hesitated for a moment, and then sprang to his feet to kiss Lan Wangji square on the lips. Then, with a grin, he darted out of the cave, ignoring Jiang Cheng’s squawk of outrage. Sizhui was blushing slightly, though his smile was a little stronger, while Jingyi was grinning widely, looking very satisfied. For a moment, Lan Wangji didn’t move, his ears bright red. Then, he blinked, and looked at Zixuan.

“He did not tell me where the kitchen is.”

“Of course he didn’t, he’s utterly useless!” snarled Jiang Cheng, who was currently tying his belt. “Shameless.”

“Alright,” Zixuan said, in what he hoped was a placating manner as Lan Wangji glared at Jiang Cheng. “Lan-er-gongzi, if you go and find him, I’ll wake Jinling and Zizhen.”

Lan Wangji nodded once, and Zixuan let out a small sigh of relief as he walked after Wei Wuxian. Jiang Cheng shook his head, and Zixuan wondered if Yanli’s permanent state had been one of exasperation as a child.

Except it wouldn’t have been, because his wife had more patience than a saint, and an endless supply of affection towards her little brothers.

Deciding that the safest thing to do at such an hour was just leave Jiang Cheng to wake up on his own, Zixuan made his way over to the back room of the cave, pulling back the curtain.

Of the two boys, only Jinling was still asleep. Zizhen was already dressed, and just in the process of combing his hair through with his fingers.

“Good morning,” he said, bowing at Jin Zixuan. “I’ll only be a moment.”

“Good morning,” Zixuan returned. “There’s no rush.” Not yet at least. The plans they had gone over last night did require moving on a tight schedule, but there was more than enough time for the boy to put up his hair. “It’s not quite dawn, yet.”

Zizhen nodded, slotting his hairpiece into place. Then, his eyes flickered between Jinling and Zixuan, and he gave a soft smile.

“I’ll go find Jingyi and Sizhui,” he said, bowing again and then ducking past Zixuan and out of the curtain.

Leaving Zixuan alone with his son. It was the first time they had been alone, really, and the thought struck him with surprising strength. Fast asleep, Jinling looked young, very young, and Zixuan reminded himself that though Jinling was a good deal older than Rulan, he was still a child.

Zixuan’s own father had never been the one to wake him. It had been servants, mostly, that dealt with him in the early morning. Sometimes his mother, if the mood took her. Ignoring these thoughts, Zixuan stepped into the little back room and knelt at his son’s side, shaking his shoulder gently.

“A-Ling,” he said. “It’s time to wake up.”

Jinling stiffened, and then slowly opened his eyes. When he saw Zixuan, the tension melted from him at once, and he let out a tiny breath of a sigh. “A-Die...”

Zixuan smiled. “Good morning. Your friends are all awake, but you’re not the last up. We haven’t seen the Wens yet today.”

Jinling nodded, fumbling up into a sitting position and rubbing at his eyes for a moment, before staring at Zixuan. After a second, he ducked his eyes. “I’m sorry... I just... I thought for a second yesterday might’ve been a dream...”

“I can imagine,” Zixuan said, nodding slowly. “But it wasn’t. I’m here, and so is your mother.”

Jinling smiled, his eyes shining, though Zixuan didn’t have a chance to figure out whether they sparkled with happiness or tears before his son fell towards him. Zixuan wasn’t able to keep the smile from his face as he hugged his son close, but really, he wasn’t trying.

“How mad are Wei Wuxian and Hanguang Jun?” Jinling asked without letting go. He sounded more curious than concerned.

“Not very. It seems the conversation prompted them to have a talk of their own, and that they’ve since figured out that yes, they are now courting. If nothing else, it provided a great source of amusement for Jiang Cheng.”

Jinling snickered, finally pulling back from the hug. “I heard him laughing.”

“He was very pleased to have footing on which to tease his brother, I think,” he said, studying the look on Jinling’s face. “A-Ling, I wanted to ask you something.”

“What?” Jinling asked curiously, and Zixuan hesitated.

“I just wondered... Last night your friends were very insistent that they are of the Lan Clan. It was important to them to remain so. But you didn’t protest at all when Wei Wuxian suggested that you become part of the Jiang Clan instead.” Jinling looked up sharply, fear in his eyes, and Zixuan backtracked quickly. “I’m not upset! But I did wonder why?”

Jinling seemed to shrink in on himself, his eyes ducking down to his sleeves and his arms wrapping around his waist. “I... I...”

“You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to,” Zixuan said swiftly, trying his best to make his voice as gentle as Yanli’s.

“It’s not... It’s, I – A-Die it’s not you, and, and I wouldn’t have thought about not being, but –” He broke off, shrinking further, and Zixuan winced.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I’m not... good with words, most of the time.”

That made Jinling look up at him, and he shook his head. “No, it’s...” He looked down again and took a deep breath. “The Jin Clan was my clan, and Jinlintai was my home, and Jin Guangyao... Jin Guangyao was my Xiao-shushu,” he admitted, his voice turning very small as his arms grew tighter around himself. “But... but Xiao-shushu did... he did horrible things and – and the Jin Clan followed. When he took us away his guards, they, they were all of Lanling Jin and they... they didn’t hesitate to... to...” His lip shaking, Jinling looked up to meet Zixuan’s gaze, heartache and fear in his eyes. “The Jin Clan held a sword to my throat, A-Die, to, to make Jiujiu behave.”

Horror burnt in Zixuan’s stomach so fiercely he felt sick, and he realised after a moment that he was shaking. “A-Ling,” he said slowly, “that will never, *ever*, happen again. I don’t – I understand why it makes sense to have you say you are of the Jiang – I do. I don’t blame you at all for wanting to be, not after that... And after yesterday...” He shook his head. “What I’m trying to say is that I know it makes sense for you to take the family name Yu, and claim your place in the Jiang Clan. But you are still our son, alright? You are still mine, and as long as I’m alive no Jin Cultivator will *ever* touch you – if they do, I will gut them.”

A small smile tugged at Jinling’s cheek. “Okay, A-Die.”

“Good.” Zixuan smiled back, but it faded as he looked at vermillion mark on his son’s head. A lump grew in his throat as his heart clenched, and the idea that his *son* would no longer be a part of his clan truly began to sink in. Jinling glanced up, and then his swallowed, his fingers rising towards the mark.

“I’m... I’m going to have to take it off, aren’t I?”

Zixuan’s heart twisted painfully, denial ripping through him, but this wasn’t about him. This was about Jinling – about keeping him safe, and making sure he *knew* he was safe. So he took a deep breath, and nodded. “For now. Later, when everything has settled, and it is safe to, you can pledge to join the Jin Clan if you liked, and you can wear it again then. But only when it’s safe, and only if you want to. I won’t be upset if you don’t. And you don’t need to decide anything now.”

Jinling nodded, biting his lip. There was a faraway look in his eyes, and it was a long moment before he spoke again. “But you’re... you’re not upset with me?”

“No,” said Zixuan immediately. “Not at all. Anyway, from what you said yesterday Lotus Pier seemed to be as much a home for you as Jinlintai?” When Jinling nodded, Zixuan

smiled. “In that case, I can’t be upset with you for wanting to go home then, can I?”

Jinling stared at him for a moment, and then he flung himself into his arms again. Zixuan laughed slightly, letting his son squeeze the air out of his lungs and rubbing back gently.

“Thank you, A-Die,” Jinling mumbled, his voice somewhat muffled where he was pressing his face into Zixuan’s shoulder.

“There’s no need to thank me,” Zixuan murmured. “None at all. Come on – it’s time to get up. We’ve a lot to do today, and if we do it right you’ll be home by nightfall.”

Jinling seemed to perk up a bit at that, and Zixuan smiled. He went to stand up, but then he paused.

“Jinling? I’m glad you’re here.”

Jinling’s eyes filled with tears, but it was with a smile that he nodded. “Me too.”

Zixuan ducked back out of the back room to give his son space to get dressed properly, and as he did he saw Wei Wuxian coming back into the cave, chattering away to A-Yuan, who was perched on his hip. When the boy saw Zixuan he didn’t scream, but it did look like his little fists clutched his father’s robes closer, and Zixuan felt a fresh surge of rage towards Zixun and A-Yao, and any other cultivator who had visited those camps. Mingled in with it was a fury towards Jin Guangyao, to the unnamed cultivators of his own clan who would put their swords to the throat of his son.

It was an anger far stronger than Zixuan was used to, an anger that demanded an outlet, and as he thought of everything he had been told the day before his hand tightened around the Qiankun pouch that contained Jin Zixun’s sword.

And Jin Zixuan had an idea.

## Chapter End Notes

Not gonna lie guys, the characters got away from me a bit in this chapter - we were meant to have the first part of leaving the Burial Mounds but noo, Zixuan wanted to be introspective and cute with Yanli, and then Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng wanted cuddles, and then Jinling and Jin Zixuan wanted cuddles and so we got less plot than I'd hoped, hahaha! Though, to be fair, I suppose everyone does deserve some time for cuddles. As for leaving the Burial Mounds, we'll get (at least part of the way there) next time!

I hope you enjoyed that chapter, please do let me know what you thought! Until next time, do take care!

# Chapter 18

## Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for all your amazing feedback! I love you guys so much!

As a note to the Chinese in this chapter, at one point Wei Wuxian refers to Zizhen as 'tangdi' which means cousin (specifically the son of the brother of your dad who is younger than you)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Jinling thought it was a pretty good show of patience that he waited until after breakfast to talk to his Jiujiu alone. And it was patience – it wasn't even slightly that he was nervous about how much Jiang Cheng had been able to process, or whether he had fully accepted Jinling as his nephew yet, or how badly it would hurt when they were alone and things were different. It had nothing to do with the way it made his head spin to see his Jiujiu looking so young, so vulnerable, nothing to do with how it made him feel slightly sick to know that however well he knew Jiang Cheng, his uncle didn't know him at all. No, it wasn't any of that.

But Jinling couldn't wait forever. According to the plan that his father and Wei Wuxian had outlined over breakfast, Jiujiu would be among the group going to Jinlintai today, along with Jinling's father, and the idea of either of them leaving him behind made his heart cringe. He knew that they could take care of themselves, that they were capable warriors. He knew that if everything went to plan, there wouldn't even be any fighting.

If everything went to plan. Jinling didn't trust that they would. Plans could fail, and his father and his uncle were only human. A-Die and Jiujiu had both died before, and they could die again, leave him *again*, and Jinling couldn't let Jiujiu go without at least talking to him first.

To his relief, it wasn't difficult at all to get Jiang Cheng alone. All he had to do was walk up to him, declare that he wanted a word, and then stalk into the back room. Jiujiu followed, and no one else did. The negative side to this approach was that Jiang Cheng now looked very nervous, his brow furrowed in what others might think was anger, his arms crossed over his chest. The unease in his eyes was less well hidden than Jinling was used to, and the clench of his jaw was stiffer.

Jinling paused. He wasn't sure he'd exactly thought this through – he didn't really know exactly what it was he wanted to say, and it wasn't like Jiujiu was any good at talking about emotions. That had always been Xiao-shushu's speciality.

He winced. Jin Guangyao. His name was Jin Guangyao, and he couldn't be Xiao-shushu, not anymore.

“What’s wrong?” Jiang Cheng asked, his voice walking a knife edge between suspicion and concern. It was the tone he used to use when Jinling turned up late after a night-hunt, when Jiujiu wasn’t sure yet whether he should be worried or angry. Of course, with Jiujiu most things came out as angry, but the tone was so familiar that Jinling felt a little of the tension ease out of his shoulders.

He shook his head and opened his mouth, but suddenly there was a lump in his throat, and his eyes were stinging, and Jinling didn’t know what to do. What he *wanted* to do was throw himself across the room and cling to Jiujiu like a baby, the way he had with A-Die and A-Niang, but he didn’t think Jiang Cheng would like it much if he did.

“Jinling? What’s wrong?” Jiang Cheng repeated, and there was a flare of fear in his eyes. “Did I – did I - do something else? In your future, did I...?”

Jinling shook his head quickly. “No, it’s not that. And, and you shouldn’t be sorry for things you haven’t done yet. That’s, that’s not fair.”

Jiang Cheng’s shoulders relaxed a fraction, but his eyes grew a little narrower, and more suspicious, and Jinling swallowed. “Then what’s wrong?”

Normally, by now, Jiujiu would have seen that he was really upset, and he would have pulled him into a rough hug and called him a little fool, but this Jiang Cheng didn’t know that, and he didn’t know Jinling. Jinling wasn’t used to being the one who had to figure out what to say.

“I – um – I... You better not be late back to Lotus Pier!” he blurted out suddenly, and his uncle’s eyes widened a little. The words tumbled out of Jinling in a slight panic, words rawer and more honest than he intended to let out. “You scared me, Jiujiu. The ritual –” His uncle flinched, and Jinling closed his eyes tightly. “I’m sorry, Jiujiu – I’m sorry.”

There was a long pause, and Jinling winced, a horrible awkwardness settling in the silence. It felt wrong. His uncle could be awkward as a person, that was true, but not with Jinling, never with Jinling, except now –

“You don’t have anything to be sorry for,” Jiang Cheng’s voice was a mix of a scoff and a scold – quieter than normal, and a little stiff, but *familiar*, and Jinling opened his eyes hesitantly. His uncle’s eyes were still guarded, but they were a little softer than that had been before. “I’ll do my best not to scare you again.”

Jinling nodded, but the “Good!” he managed to choke out was more short than strangled, and he looked away, biting down on his lip, and desperately fighting the urge to fling himself at Jiujiu.

“Jinling...” Jiujiu said, and that was a lower voice, his concerned voice, and Jiang Cheng took a hesitant step closer. “Are you okay?”

Something about the worry in his tone broke the last of Jinling’s self-control, and he barely had time to choke out an apology before he was throwing himself into his uncle. Jiang Cheng

staggered back a pace and stiffened, and Jinling winced again, but he couldn't stop himself from hugging his Jiujiu tightly, from hiding his face in his shoulder. "I'm sorry!"

For an aching long moment, Jiang Cheng didn't move, and Jinling squeezed his eyes shut tightly, preparing for the moment his uncle pushed him away. But then, Jiujiu shifted, and began to hesitantly pat Jinling on the back.

"It's okay," he said, and he didn't exactly sound comfortable, but he didn't sound upset, either. "You don't have to be sorry." He paused, and then said quietly, "It was just you and me for a while, wasn't it?"

He nodded into his uncle's shoulder, and then the memory of Jiujiu driving the knife into his own heart hit Jinling, and he shuddered, clinging on tighter. He could feel tears burning in his eyes, and grief and horror and guilt were stirring in his chest, but he could ignore it all if he just held onto his Jiujiu, as long as he could feel his Jiujiu breathing.

"I love you, Jiujiu," he whispered, so quietly he wasn't sure his uncle would hear it. He knew Jiang Cheng would be unlikely to say it back, not yet – he barely knew Jinling, and Jinling knew that his Jiujiu didn't like admitting affection for anyone other than those he truly, deeply cared about.

So it came as a surprise when Jiang Cheng said, "I love you too, A-Ling."

Jinling's head jerked up in shock, and his voice trembled. "You – you don't know me, though..."

Jiang Cheng frowned slightly, pushing Jinling back just enough to look at his face properly. "I just met you, yes. But you're still my nephew, aren't you? You're still our Jinling. That's all I need to know."

"Jiujiu," Jinling whispered.

"Jinling!" yelled Jingyi from somewhere outside. "Where are you? Are you slacking off again – we're supposed to be helping!"

"Give me a minute!" Jinling yelled back through curtain, scowling, and he heard Jiang Cheng snicker. He turned to face his uncle again, scowl deepening. "What?"

"Nothing," Jiujiu said, but he was grinning. "Come on, we wouldn't want your friends to think you're slacking now, would we?"

Jinling rolled his eyes, muttering under his breath about how surely Jingyi was the one who was slacking if he had time to run around yelling at people, and Jiang Cheng laughed, reaching out and messing up Jinling's hair. Jinling froze.

Jiujiu had never done *that* before. That seemed like a much more Wei Wuxian thing to do.

But Jiujiu was grinning, and he looked happy in a way that Jinling had hardly ever seen him, and Jinling couldn't help but grin back.

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Lan Wangji did not think he had ever been quite so nervous about seeing his uncle. Of course, there were many reasons for him to be concerned – they wanted to move out of the Burial Mounds as quickly as possible, and if the Lan delegation were late, that would delay things. Additionally, they did not yet know if they had found Haoran and Liling – if his cousin had not been tracked down, that would make it difficult to ‘prove’ that he had been the one to take A-Yu from Cloud Recesses. There was also the issue of how the elders had reacted to the news Lan Qiren brought back, and whether any of them had protested. They would have grounds to, of course – many rules were being bent or broken.

More than anything, though, Wangji was terrified as to how Shufu would react to Wei Ying. He had barely been tolerant yesterday before the – talisman incident – and when Lan Wangji and Wei Ying had returned from the woods Lan Qiren had looked... well, apoplectic.

The disappointment in his eyes... He hadn’t even *looked* at Lan Wangji, but Wangji had seen it all the same, and it had hurt. Badly. In his head, he had known for a long time that at best, Lan Qiren would tolerate Wei Ying, if he was proven innocent. But in his heart, Wangji desperately wanted his Shufu to *like* Wei Ying. To be proud of the choices Lan Wangji had made, to look at the man he loved and see even just a fraction of what it was that made him so special.

It was a childish dream, and he knew it, but it hurt to think of Shufu regarding Wei Ying with hatred. It hurt more than Wangji would have expected.

The first of his worries was not realised – it was less than an hour past dawn that Wei Ying declared there was someone at the wards. Lan Wangji’s heart was beating far too fast as he followed Wei Ying down the path. His mouth felt very dry.

A small, childish part of Wangji hoped that his brother would be there, that Lan Guiren and Lan Mingyu had found him and that he would be standing there beside Shufu with a knowing smile –

But he wasn’t. Instead, it was the same group of elders as yesterday, minus the two who had been sent to find Xichen. Wangji felt a little relief at seeing his cousin Haoran and his wife with them, but he couldn’t help the disappointment that stirred in his heart that Xiongzhong wasn’t.

“Good morning, Lan-xiansheng,” Wei Ying said, bowing low. There was a pause, and then Lan Qiren bowed back, no further than he had to.

“Good morning,” he said tightly, and his eyes flickered to Lan Wangji. “I have relayed the details of what we discussed yesterday to the elders with me. All have agreed to help.”

Wangji let his gaze run over those who were gathered there for a moment. He hadn’t noticed yesterday, but as he looked over the familiar faces he realised that every one of the elders gathered were those he knew and trusted – those he knew thought well of Wangji himself. Wangji looked back at Wei Ying and nodded.

“In that case, you’re all welcome to come inside and here what we’re going to do,” Wei Ying said carefully. “I take it it’s understood why secrecy is essential? Why no one outside of this



group can *ever* know about where Sizhui, Jingyi, and the others come from?”

Lan Qiren stared at Wei Ying with a look that bordered on disgust and Wangji hid a wince, but after a moment his uncle nodded.

“We have all sworn to our silence, Wei-gongzi,” said Lu Meilin solemnly. “None here will break it.”

Wei Ying bowed to her. “Thank you. Now...” he hesitated, and Wangji understood. Thirty-two strangers were a lot to trust. “I will let you all inside, but I will warn you only once – anyone who raises a hand to any of the Wen will be forcibly removed from the Burial Mounds – by any means necessary.”

Some of the elders bristled at such a threat, but Lan Qiren spoke tightly. “We may be on your territory, Wei-gongzi, but authority to discipline Lan disciples does not lie with you. As such, I will remove anyone who brings harm onto the Wen myself.”

A ripple of shock ran over the faces of the offended elders, but they all nodded their understanding. Clearly, whatever Shufu had told them about the Wen had prepared them for Wei Ying’s fierce protection. Once again, Wei Ying glanced at Lan Wangji, waiting for his nod before he let the Lan through the wards.

Lan Qiren strode through first, but Lu Meilin and Haoran were not far behind, and the second they had passed through the gate, A-Yu began squirming on his father’s hip.

“Down, Baba, I wanna get down!” he demanded, wiggling around to grab his father’s chin. “*Please!*”

Haoran glanced at his mother, who in turn inclined her head towards Wangji.

“He may get down,” Lan Wangji said. “If he does not go through the wards there is no danger. He knows the way.”

“See, Baba, see?” A-Yu begged, still squirming. “Please!”

Haoran snorted, putting the boy down, and at once A-Yu sprinted down the path, hit little legs moving faster than should be possible as he yelled, “Ning-gege, A-Yuan, Ning-gege!” at the top of his lungs.

Haoran raised an eyebrow at Lan Wangji. “I go on one night-hunt and I come back to find my three-year-old obsessed with the Ghost General. Ridiculous.” Wangji felt Wei Ying stiffen slightly at his side, but Haoran seemed to notice it too, and he smiled slightly, inclining his head. “I met Wen-gongzi once or twice, when he was studying at Cloud Recess. I was sorry to hear what he has suffered.”

Wei Ying blinked, looking a little taken aback for a moment. “I’m sure he appreciates that,” he said. “Lan Zhan, will you lead everyone up to the house? I’ll close the wards and take up the rear.”

Lan Zhan nodded, turning to walk up the path after little A-Yu. By the time they got to the Demon Subdue Palace, A-Yu had found both A-Yuan and Wen Ning. He was already clambering up to sit on Wen Ning's shoulders, chattering excitedly to A-Yuan about how his Mama and Baba had come back from the night hunt *early* just to meet 'Big Me' and how it was all really exciting. A-Yuan was looking up at him, his arms around Wen Ning's legs, but when he saw how many people were coming nearer the little boy's eyes widened, and he pressed closer to Wen Ning.

"Uh, it's alright, A-Yuan," Wen Ning said, lifting an arm up to steady A-Yu so he could bow a little. "These are friends, of A-Yu and Rich-gege, and your A-Die."

A-Yuan looked uncertain, peering around the group. "Where's A-Die?"

"Right here," Wei Ying called, jogging around from the back of the group to reach Wen Ning's side. At once, A-Yuan beamed, hurling himself towards his father, and Wei Ying crouched down, pinching his cheek. "Can you and Wen Ning and A-Yu go and find Jingyi for me? I think they're helping Qing-jiejie in the backroom."

"Okay!" A-Yuan said, reaching up to take Wen Ning's hand and leading him into the Demon Subdue Palace. Today, the doors were wide open, a constant stream of people bustling in and out as Wei Ying and the Wens tried to pack up their entire lives in the span of a morning. Many of the Wen cast the Lan cultivators glances that ranged from nervous to terrified, but none of them fled or hid. Wei Ying had promised them they would be safe, and they trusted him.

"I take it that you have *some* sort of a plan," Lan Qiren said stiffly, in a tone that suggested he thought any plan they had would be far from satisfactory, and Lan Wangji had to fight not to cringe. He met his uncle's eyes for a moment, feeling the sting of his disappointment, and then he looked down.

"Yes," said Wei Ying, standing at Lan Zhan's side. "Did your people have any luck finding Zewu Jun?"

"No," said Lan Qiren, and there was a flicker of concern in his voice that Lan Wangji knew few others could other. "But they have informed us that Jin Guangyao is also missing. Neither have been seen since a half hour before you left Jinlintai."

A lump rose in Lan Wangji's throat. He wasn't sure exactly why – it wasn't a surprise, or new information, only a confirmation of something he was already sure of. Beside him, Wei Ying shifted, his shoulder brushing against Lan Wangji's in a silent comfort.

"I'm sorry to hear that," Wei Ying said sincerely. "As soon as the Wen are safe, I'll do anything I can to help you find Zewu Jun. Our plan is to get out of the Burial Mounds today – ideally by noon. Jiang Cheng went down to the river earlier this morning, and he's already sorted out the boats – there's a path we can take to the docks to avoid Yiling itself, so we shouldn't draw too much attention. With any luck, the Wen should be safely in Lotus Pier by nightfall."

“We would ask for help in protecting them on the road,” Lan Wangji said, meeting Shufu’s eyes. “Jiang-zongzhu, Jin-gongzi, and Wei Zizhen will be going to Jinlintai to give an account of the events at Qiongqi Pass. Wei Ying and I will stay behind, to destroy the Stygian Tiger Amulet.” A few of the elders’ eyes widened at that, and Wangji felt Wei Ying shift uncomfortably beside him. “Wen Ning is strong, but we know that Jin Guangyao has been using a demonic cultivator, and Sizhui, Jingyi, and Jingling are very young.” Lan Wangji paused for a moment, holding his uncle’s gaze. “Shufu, we hoped that you would agree to go to Jinlintai, and speak of what you have seen of the Wen, and that Lu Meilin would consent to give an account of what happened to A-Yu.”

“I will,” said Lu Meilin smoothly, and beside her, Haoran nodded.

“I’ll go too,” he said. “We’ll take A-Yu with us. It’ll be easier to convince Jinlintai that he is safe and sound if they can see him.”

Lan Wangji couldn’t let himself be relieved – not yet. “We do not wish to ask you to lie, but...”

“Wangji, there are lives at stake, my son’s among them,” Haoran said seriously, but his eyes were fond as they met Wangji’s. “If it takes attention away from Jingyi to say I hit my head on a night-hunt and accidentally kidnapped my own son, then I won’t hold that lie on my conscious. Though of course I shall kneel and reflect, should my elders see fit.”

“Where is Jingyi?” Liling asked, her brow furrowed as she glanced over the Wens. “And A-Yu... he’s been gone a while, now.”

It had only been a few minutes, if that, but Lan Wangji couldn’t blame Liling for her worry. Not when she’d been dragged out of a night-hunt to the news that her son had been kidnapped, and also befriended the ‘Ghost General,’ and also that his nineteen-year-old self had returned from the future, and had in fact been the one to do the kidnapping.

From the gentleness in his eyes as he smiled, Wei Ying was thinking along the same lines. “They’ll be over in a minute. Jingyi and Sizhui were helping Wen Qing pack up her medical things, so they probably just have their hands full. Don’t worry, there’s nowhere for them to disappear to in the cave.”

“Hmm,” said Shufu, and Wangji looked to him quickly. “Such a plan... It is acceptable. I will go to Jinlintai, with Meilin, Haoran, Liling and A-Yu. The other disciples here will accompany the Wen to Lotus Pier.”

Relief flooded through Wangji from his head to his toes, and beside him, Wei Ying all but fell into a bow.

“Thank you, Lan-xiansheng,” he breathed, and Wangji could see his hands trembling. “Thank you!”

“Thank you, Shufu,” Wangji added, with a bow of his own, and Lan Qiren nodded.

“What needs to be done to ensure the Wen are ready to move by noon?”

“Uh, I’m not completely sure,” Wei Ying said, glancing over his shoulder and catching Sishu’s eye. He beckoned to the older man. “I’ve been trying not to get in the way – Sishu and Wen Qing are organising everything.”

Sishu walked over, his eyes flickering hesitantly between Wei Ying, Lan Qiren, and the other Lan cultivators. “Wei-gongzi?”

“The Lan have offered to help us,” Wei Ying said, and Sishu’s eyes widened. “Would you mind letting them now how they can help us pack up?”

“Of course, Wei-gongzi, of course!” Sishu said.

In that moment, A-Yuan reappeared in the door of the palace, dragging Wen Ning out behind him. A-Yu was still on Wen Ning’s shoulders, and Jingyi was just a step behind.

Wei Ying smiled. “Uh, Sishu, we’ve got another little family reunion here, why don’t you take the others over to the house?”

Sishu bowed, leading most of the elders away. Lu Meilin and Lan Qiren remained behind, with Haoran and Liling, and Wangji glanced towards Lan Jingyi.

The boy’s face had lit up at the sight of his parents, though his joy was tempered by a sight uncertainty in his eyes. Wangji couldn’t blame him – not after the way that he, Lan Qiren, and Lu Meilin had all responded to the boy the day before.

That said, to see him and Haoran now in the same place, the similarities between them were indeed very strong. Haoran’s nose was a little more pointed, and his face a little sharper, but Wangji did not think anyone would have a hard time believing that the two were brothers.

“A-Die, A-Niang,” Jingyi said as he reached them, bowing with a small smile, and Liling gave a disbelieving little laugh.

“Well, if he’s not our son from the future then he’s stolen your smile somehow, Haoran,” she said, shaking her head slightly. “So it’s really true... you are really our A-Yu, all grown up?” Jingyi nodded, and Liling smiled. “Well, in that case, I don’t know exactly what etiquette says about such a situation as this, Jingyi, but if it’s alright with you I’d quite like to give you a hug.”

Beaming, Jingyi threw himself forward to embrace his parents.

“Let’s give them a bit of privacy,” Wei Ying said, and Lan Wangji nodded, his eyes flickering towards his uncle. With a soft smile, Wei Ying nodded. “I’ll go check on Wen Qing.”

Alarm shot through Wangji, but it was too late – Wei Ying was already jogging back in the direction of the Demon Subdue Palace. A second later, A-Yuan scurried off after him like a little shadow, and as much as he wanted to follow, too, Wangji knew why Wei Ying had gone inside.

“Shufu?” he said quietly. “May I speak with you?”

“I think that would be best,” Lan Qiren said stiffly, and Wangji nodded, leading his uncle a short way away from the others. They ended up near the lotus pond, which was towards the middle of the courtyard and therefore out of the way of the people bustling in and out of the house and cave. It was not nearly as private as Wangji would have liked, but there was nowhere else to go.

Lan Wangji had no intention of wandering into the woods again. Even with his wits about him, even knowing where the wards were. The memory of the resentful energy scouring through his body made his throat burn, his stomach and eyes and chest aching with the echo of the attack. How Wei Ying had survived three months of that without a golden core...

No. Wangji was not going into the woods of the Burial Mounds anytime soon.

He shuddered.

“Wangji?” There was a touch of concern to Lan Qiren’s voice, and Wangji forced himself to meet his uncle’s eyes.

“Shufu,” he said, and then his voice got stuck in his throat. There was so much to say, and Wangji did not know where to start. He lowered his eyes, and tried to think of the beginning. “Yesterday at the gate I disobeyed you. I am sorry.”

“If you wish to apologise for anything,” said Lan Qiren curtly, “it should be for failing to explain yourself properly. I cannot read your mind, Wangji. Yesterday, you did the right thing to stand your ground and protect these people, but you did not tell me what you were doing, or why. The explanation came from Wei Wuxian.” He pronounced the name with disgust, and Lan Wangji swallowed. “This time, I will let it go. In regards to the evening...”

Wangji couldn’t help but look up at his uncle’s face, his heart clenching in his chest. Lan Qiren wore the same expression of disapproval he had the night before, though a little of the anger had seeped out of it. However, as he looked at Wangji, something shifted in his gaze – something Wangji couldn’t quite interpret.

“I spoke with Meilin last night – none of the other elders are aware of *that* particular conversation. All we will say of it now is that it would be inappropriate to begin an official courtship without your brother’s approval. I expect any public announcement to be saved for after you have spoken to Xichen.”

For the second time in two days, Lan Wangji’s mouth dropped open slightly. Coming from his uncle that was – that almost sounded like –

“I do not approve,” Lan Qiren said wearily. “At least, I cannot say I do not think you deserve much better. I do not like him. But... it seems that perhaps, Wei Wuxian is not quite as undeserving of you than I thought. I will not stand in your way.”

It was a bittersweet relief, but it was a relief all the same, and Wangji bowed. “Thank you, Shufu.”

“As I said – it cannot be public until you have spoken to your brother,” said Lan Qiren, for a moment letting Wangji hear the deep concern in his voice, and the mirroring fear in his eyes.

A chill ran down Wangji’s spine. Shufu was not saying to wait for Xichen’s approval because it was the proper thing to do. They both knew Xichen would approve a marriage to almost anyone if it would make Wangji happy. Shufu was saying to wait because they didn’t know where Xichen *was*, because finding him was the priority, and –

Horror and shame and a little anger struck Wangji in the gut, and he swallowed. If his Shufu thought Wangji’s priorities placed announcing or negotiating a courtship over finding his xiongzhang –

“Shufu, I won’t stop until I find him,” Wangji swore, his throat tightening. “It – I will not get distracted, or –”

“I know,” said Lan Qiren sharply, the corner of his eye twitching in what Wangji recognised as a wince. “I did not mean to imply you would.” Wangji breathed out, his eyes closing for a fraction of a second, and his uncle’s voice grew a little softer. “You are neither unfilial nor selfish, Wangji. I know that. I have never thought for a moment that you would do anything less than your best for your brother. I am...” He paused, looking away for a moment. Then, he looked back. “The amulet.”

Wangji took a deep breath, and nodded.

“The plan is to destroy it?”

“If we can do so safely,” said Wangji. “Wei Ying has an idea as to how. If it succeeds, we will re-join the Wen before they reach Yunmeng.”

“And if it fails?”

“We will take it with us to Yunmeng,” said Wangji. “Destroy it later.”

His uncle let out a slow breath, and then nodded. “Good. Do not take any unnecessary risks, Wangji.” The sentence “I don’t need to worry about you, too” went unspoken, but Wangji heard it, and he bowed again.

“I won’t, Shufu.”

“Good,” Lan Qiren said again, staring at him for a long moment. Then, he raised his chin. “I will go and see if anyone requires my assistance.”

Wangji nodded, and his uncle swept away, striding back towards Haoran and Liling, who were still talking to Jingyi. Sizhui had joined them, though Wen Ning had gone to help pack the cart, and it looked like A-Yu had gone with him.

Before Wangji could even wonder where he would be most useful, Wei Ying appeared at his side.

“Are you alright?” he asked, his eyes flickering over Wangji’s face.

“Fine,” said Wangji. “What needs to be done?”

“Not much,” Wei Ying admitted. “I’ll be surprised if it even takes us till mid-morning to get ready at this rate. It’s strange though, I’d never imagined we’ve accumulated so much *stuff*. It seems a shame to leave the crops here to rot, though... Sishu’s insisting we bring as many radishes as we can harvest today to offer something to Lotus Pier – we don’t *need* to, but it’ll make everyone feel better.”

Wangji let the chatter wash over him, feeling just a little of the tension easing from his heart at the sound of Wei Ying’s voice. After a moment, he lost track of what it was Wei Ying was saying – something about the radishes, he thought – as his mind shifted towards what was next. Destroying the amulet, moving the Wens, convincing Jinlintai – it all had to be done before he could go and look for his brother. Theoretically, his role in such things could be completed by nightfall, but that still seemed so far away.

“Wei Wuxian, what are you-”

Wangji looked up sharply to see Jiang Wanyin a few paces away, frozen as though he had stopped mid-stride. He was staring at the lotus pond, his eyes wide, and his face surprisingly slack.

“Uh, Jiang Cheng? Are you okay?” Wei Ying asked, and Jiang Wanyin blinked.

He glanced up at Wei Ying, and murmured in a voice that sounded very young, “You planted a lotus pond?”

Wei Ying nodded proudly. “Yep. No one thought I could, but I did it!”

Slowly, Jiang Wanyin stepped closer, reaching out to run his fingers over one of the stems. The corner of his lip twitched up a little, almost as though he was going to smile, but then his face crumpled into what was unmistakably sorrow.

Wei Ying moved hesitantly towards his brother. “Jiang Cheng?”

Jiang Wanyin flinched, and then shook his head, looking at Wei Ying. “Nothing – it’s nothing.” He cleared his throat. “Anyway – we’re nearly ready to go.”

Wei Ying’s eyebrows rose. “Already?”

Jiang Wanyin nodded, looking suddenly sombre. “Yes. Wen Qing said the Wen will be ready in another half hour or so, tops, and it doesn’t make sense for us to wait around much longer. The sooner we get to Jinlintai, the better.”

“That makes sense,” Wei Ying admitted, though he sounded reluctant. “Alright, let’s go.”

The night before, they’d discussed at length who should go to Jinlintai, and Wangji was confident in the logic of their choice. Jin Zixuan, of course, had the most pressing need to go in person, and Jiang Wanyin was a clan leader. His presence and testimony should go a long way, though he was still young, and still the brother of Wei Wuxian.

Additionally, it would be suspicious if none of the time-travellers showed up, given their sudden appearance at the pass, and of the four of them it would be safest for Zizhen to go. Jinling had been seen in the clothing of the Jin, so it would not be wise for him to appear in Lanling until he was clothed more appropriately and Jin Zixun had been discredited. Sizhui and Jingyi were yet to be officially claimed by Lan Liqin, so technically they shouldn't have been wearing Lan robes at the pass, either. If they announced themselves at Jinlintai, they too would draw attention to themselves.

When they had been told the plan at breakfast, not one of the four had looked pleased about splitting up, and as Wei Ying, Wangji, and Jiang Wanyin approached them now they did not look any happier.

“What if you see your father?” Jinling was protesting, an anxious scowl on his face. With a start, Wangji noticed that the boy was no longer wearing the vermillion mark on his head. His face looked strangely bare without it, like a Lan without their ribbon.

Zizhen winced slightly. He was wearing a purple inner robe, courtesy of Jiang Wanyin's Qiankun sleeve (Lan Wangji had been utterly unsurprised that the young clan leader carried a change of clothes with him everywhere he went – Lan Jingyi, on the other hand, had seemed both shocked and thrilled. Wangji had seen Sizhui elbow him, quite firmly.) Over the top, Zizhen wore a black outer robe of Wei Ying's – Jiang Wanyin's own spare outer robe was too fine, and would draw too much attention. The boy wore his own headpiece, one that was well-made, but not particularly distinctive. Wangji hoped it was making Zizhen feel more like himself.

“To be honest, A-Die's the least of my worries,” the boy admitted, “I want to see him, of course I do, but I... It won't be impossible to pretend he's a stranger.”

“Ah, tangdi!” Wei Ying said, clapping his hand down on Zizhen's shoulder, and the boy smiled shyly. “Don't worry – you'll be fine. Jiang Cheng and the Peacock will take good care of you. Just remember – you're Yunmeng Jiang, and you're a Wei, and therefore no one is allowed to mess with you. Got it?”

Zizhen nodded, a little uncertainly, and Jin Zixuan rolled his eyes. Beside him, Jiang Yanli shook her head, a fond smile on her face.

“If you could have a little more tact than Wei Wuxian, though, that could go a long way,” Jin Zixuan said dryly.

“What do you mean by that?” Wei Ying demanded. “I am the most tactful!”

“Wei Wuxian,” Jiang Wanyin said, through what sounded like gritted teeth. “We don't have time to prove how wrong you are, but I can think of ten examples without even trying. Behave!”

Wei Ying opened his mouth to protest, but it was at that moment that Lan Qiren walked over with Haoran, Liling, Lu Meilin and A-Yu behind him. Mercifully, Wei Ying behaved, turning away from his brother to address Zizhen again.



“Now, no one’s going to interrogate you – they have no reason to. You’re just another Jiang disciple, and a young one, at that. They have no reason to expect to know who you were. You were out night-hunting with your cousins, and you noticed your other, most wonderful cousin,” he held a hand over his own chest with a flourish, “in mortal peril, so you intervened. That’s all there is to it,” he said.

“But don’t forget to tell them that you saw Su She’s face!” said Jingyi.

“I know,” Zizhen said with a nod. He paused, twisting his hand in his robes. “But... I, uh... I don’t have my sword.”

Ah – Wangji hadn’t thought of that. That *was* something that would make the boy stand out.

“Well, you can use Jin Zixun’s to get there –” Wei Ying began, but Jin Zixuan, who was standing nearby with his wife, gave a cough.

“Uh, maybe not,” he said, guilt blotching red across his face.

“Why not?”

Jin Zixuan stared pointedly at a rock near his foot. “This morning I was speaking to Jinling and then I was recalling what the Wen told me, and I, uh...” He cleared his throat. “Well I decided Zixun didn’t deserve a sword.”

Wei Ying frowned. “I mean, that’s a perfectly valid decision, but I don’t see why that – oh, wow.”

Wangji’s eyes widened slightly as Wei Ying broke off, both stunned at the sight of Jin Zixuan holding up the mangled handle of his cousin’s sword. The blade had been broken clean off, and the hilt itself had been bashed and battered, and bent wholly out of shape.

“I offered the stones to the Wen, but no one wanted them,” Zixuan admitted. “I don’t blame them. I’ll sell them later, perhaps by something nice for them with the profits.”

“Zixuan,” Wei Ying breathed, looking utterly delighted. “Where’s the blade?”

“I’m afraid it fell into your Blood Pool,” said Jin Zixuan, not looking particularly afraid at all. “I didn’t want to fish it out – I wasn’t sure it would be safe.”

Wei Ying let out a cackle of laughter, putting a hand on his chest. “Ah, Peacock, you might be halfway worthy of Shijie after all! Though, uh, that doesn’t solve our problem...

Unfortunately, they will give you a hard time for not carrying your sword, Zizhen. Trust me, I – oh! Wait a second!” Without another word, Wei Ying turned and ran back into the cave, returning a moment later with Suibian in his hands.

An ache struck Lan Wangji’s chest to see it. He understood now, the look of longing in Wei Ying’s eyes when he stared at his sword. The way his fingers glanced over it reverently, the way his face twinged with sadness. The way he regarded the blade like the ancestral tablet of an old friend.

With a soft smile, Wei Ying held his sword out to Zizhen. “You can borrow this.”

Wangji stiffened, and several of the others gasped sharply – Zizhen louder than all of them. The boy shook his head and took a step back, his eyes wide. “No, Wei-qianbei, I can’t!”

“Of course you can,” Wei Ying said blithely, “though you can’t be going around calling me ‘Wei-qianbei’ if we’re cousins. Wei Wuxian will work just fine.” He paused, his smile becoming wry as his fingers ran over the characters etched into his sword’s hilt. “No one ever paid much attention to Suibian... They were all more preoccupied with why I wasn’t carrying it, too worried about why I was going against orthodoxy. And Suibian’s sheath isn’t too flashy. No one will recognise it, except maybe Huaisang, but Huaisang won’t tell. Anyway – it’ll be enough to stop anyone getting suspicious about why you don’t have a sword. Just make sure you take care of it, okay?”

For a moment, Zizhen just stared at the sword, his mouth opening and closing, and then he shook his head again. “But... but didn’t Suibian seal itself?” he asked weakly.

Wei Ying frowned slightly, as though he had forgotten this.

“Can he use it if you unsheathe it?” Jin Zixuan asked Wei Ying. “If not Jiang Cheng or I could take him on our swords, but that may raise questions if we’re seen flying in.”

“I don’t know,” said Wei Ying, still frowning a little. He looked less upset than Wangji felt at the conversation, seeming to be more curious than anything else. He pulled Suibian from its sheath, and there was a flash of a bittersweet smile that lasted barely a second, and then he held out the hilt towards Zizhen. “Try.”

With eyes so wide it was almost comical, Zizhen took the hilt of the sword. He swallowed, but then he nodded, glancing up to meet Wei Ying’s eyes. “I feel... I think it will let me wield it. But... are you sure?”

“I wouldn’t have offered if I wasn’t,” Wei Ying promised, smiling warmly, and passing the boy the sword’s sheath. “Take good care of it, and of yourself, okay? Jiang Cheng will look after you. You’ll be fine.”

Zizhen nodded and bowed, and then he raised his chin slightly. “I won’t let you down, Wei q-Wei Wuxian.”

Something about the sincerity with which he said those words endeared Zizhen to Lan Wangji a little. It had been so long since he had heard anyone speak of Wei Ying with anything other than derision or hate, so long since they had looked at him as anything less than a monster, but all four of the time-travellers looked at Wei Ying with trust and care. It was strange – the affection and admiration were not aimed at him, yet it made him feel a little less alone.

Wei Ying, on the other hand, looked slightly taken aback at every sight of it. Still, he smiled, and nodded. “I know.”

A rapid patter of little feet gave Wangji a few seconds warning before a weight collided with his leg, and he looked down to see A-Yuan looking up at him. With a plaintive expression, the little boy held up his hands, and Wangji obliged, picking the child up off the ground.

“Popo says A-Yu is going now,” he said sadly, looking from Wangji to Wei Ying, and then to A-Yu. “Does he have to?”

“Yes,” said Wangji.

A-Yuan pouted. “A-Yuan wants A-Yu to stay.”

“You will see A-Yu soon,” Wangji said solemnly.

“Maybe he’ll come visit us at Lotus Pier,” Wei Ying added cheerfully, reaching over to prod A-Yuan’s little nose. “Remember I told you we’re going to Lotus Pier?”

A-Yuan made a little humming noise, sounding very uncertain. “Lotus Pier... is where Rich-gege lives?” Lan Wangji thought he saw Jiang Wanyin’s face twitch at that, and he reminded himself of the disciplines against being smug.

“No,” Wei Ying said, and A-Yuan’s hand grabbed onto Lan Wangji’s hair. Something in Wangji’s chest felt very warm. “It’s Cheng-shushu’s home.” He nodded towards Jiang Wanyin, who gave a small smile and a little wave, and A-Yuan studied the other man carefully.

“Cheng-shushu’s home,” he repeated, before looking back at his father. “Rich-gege’s coming with us?”

“Yep!” said Wei Ying, pinching A-Yuan’s cheek. “He’s stuck with us for a while, now. Is that good?”

A-Yuan nodded happily. “Good!”

Jiang Wanyin looked a little upset at the exchange, and something about that struck a chord of grim satisfaction within Lan Wangji.

Because every time he looked at Jiang Wanyin, he heard Jinling’s voice in his head.

*“They say you killed him yourself.”*

He knew he should not hold grudges, that he should be just and fair, and he also knew that though it was not written on the stone it went against the spirit of the Lan disciplines to hold someone accountable for something that they had never done.

He knew, and it was difficult to make himself care. If Jiang Wanyin had been pushed to a point to hurt Wei Ying before, he could do it again.

Lan Wangji was *not* going to let that happen.

Lan Wangji was not going to forget.

## Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed this chapter! Please do let me know what you thought, I love reading your comments! Until next time, take care.

# Chapter 19

## Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for your wonderful comments, everyone! I'm so glad everyone's enjoying the story.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

They had arrived at the Burial Mounds with nothing but the clothes on their backs. Wei Wuxian had Chenqing, and Suibian tucked away in a Qiankun sleeve, and he had traded the horses for food and medicine when they got to Yiling, but besides that, they'd had nothing.

Back then, the Burial Mounds had been a very different place. Only the palace and its courtyard were truly safe, really protected – it had been all Wei Wuxian had needed, when he was lost and alone. As the Wen started to settle, Wei Wuxian had set about clearing more room, drawing the resentment from the earth to give them space to plant, and grow, and build. He had made the pathway in and out of the mountain safer, both from resentful energy and the cultivators outside.

And as Wei Wuxian built wards, the Wen built walls. He drew the hatred from the soil, and the Wen planted their crops in its place. He hung the talismans around Wen Ning, and the Wen made enough food to go around.

As time wore on, things became less desperate, and less urgent. Wei Wuxian began to experiment, creating new talismans to make life easier, more enjoyable, inventing things that he could sell.

The Wen had begun experiment, too. One of the aunties had sewn scraps of cloth into a little puppet toy for A-Yuan, stuffing it with dried grass and straw. One of the uncles, who had once been a woodcarver, made plates and bowls and cups, and made board games and dice out of whatever they could get their hands on.

Weeks passed, and things got easier. Wei Wuxian was able to go into Yiling, and his talismans earned him just enough money to be able to buy more raw materials, too. With these, the Wen made pillows and cushions, and lanterns and incense burners. Wei Wuxian invented the evil compass, and Sishu invented a new fruit wine. Wei Wuxian created new talismans, and Popo made beads and jewellery out of wood and old twine.

Together, Wei Wuxian and the Wens had made a life in the Burial Mounds. It was a hard life, in a cruel place, but it was theirs, and it was a life that held love and beauty and care. Most of the things they created could come with them – indeed, the wagon was full of creations both of Wei Wuxian's and the Wens' – but there were some things they would have to leave behind. The beds they had built, with images carved intricately into the wooden frames. The

plants that would die in the dirt, the lotuses Wei Wuxian had so carefully coaxed to life. The paintings on the walls of the Wen's house, made by the strokes of far too bristly brushes, and thin sticks, and A-Yuan's little fingers.

That would all be left behind.

Somehow, it seemed like a lot to leave.

But, in the big scheme of things, it was not – nor was there really much to take. Their lives now fit in a single wagon, more or less. Most of the Wen carried bags with their spare clothes in, and what little personal items they had, but none had a heavy burden. Unless of course you counted Wen Ning, who would be pulling the wagon, but Wen Ning didn't mind. If Wen Qing wanted to complain about it, she could listen to Wei Wuxian point out for the thousandth time that they wouldn't need Wen Ning to pull the cart, if only they had a donkey.

"I think that's everything," Wen Qing said, her hand tightening around the strap of her own bag. She had more to carry than most, with what medical supplies she'd managed to gather throughout their time there, but Wei Wuxian knew better than to ask if that would bother her. "I think we're ready."

Wei Wuxian nodded, but inside a part of him was screaming. This was too quick, too soon. Two days ago, he had been preparing the Wens to last a week or so without him while he was in Jinlintai – now, they were all going. They were all leaving the sanctuary they had built.

And he would have to trust others – *strangers* – to keep them safe.

*No*, he thought, as firmly as he could, *I just have to trust Lan Zhan. Lan Zhan trusts them – I can trust them.*

It didn't stop him from feeling sick to his stomach at the sight of them ready to go, at the strain and concern on their faces, at how quiet they were.

In the other life, they had all left today, too – they had walked away from here to their deaths, and –

No – that thought wasn't helping. Not at all.

"Right," he said, forcing cheer into his voice and jogging A-Yuan on his hip. The boy had been almost silent for the last half hour, clinging to Wei Wuxian's neck like a little monkey. Wei Wuxian's arms were starting to get a little tired, and he wondered if A-Yuan was too big to put in a sling like the one that was currently binding little Jinling to his sister's chest. "Shijie, you didn't really bring anything with you but the baby, and you've got him. Sizhui, Jingyi, Jinling, you're all set?"

"We didn't even have a baby to bring," said Jingyi.

"Yes you did," retorted Jinling, and Jingyi frowned and opened his mouth – and then paused.

"Well, yes, but he's gone."

“We’re ready, Wei-qianbei,” Sizhui said seriously, his eyes flickering between Wei Wuxian and Lan Zhan. Wei Wuxian’s heart hurt a little, and he put a hand on the boy’s shoulder.

“It’s going to be fine,” he promised. “Just keep your wits about you, and be careful. We’ll see you soon, okay?”

Sizhui nodded hesitantly, and then threw his arms around Wei Wuxian tightly. “Be careful,” he whispered, his voice trembling slightly. “Please be careful, Wei-qianbei, please.”

“I will,” Wei Wuxian swore, biting back the urge to make some sort of a joke. After everything he had been through, he knew why Sizhui was asking. “I promise.”

Sizhui clung tighter for a moment, and A-Yuan, who had been somewhat sandwiched in the hug, peered down at him. After a pause, the toddler reached out, patting his older self’s hair gently. The moment was too precious for Wei Wuxian, who was sure that his heart was going to melt into a gooey mess in his chest.

And then it turned to ice instead.

Yesterday, he had promised A-Yuan that being his father meant he would stay, that he would always try his best to make his way back to his side – something that he hadn’t done for Sizhui. In that moment, he had been so overwhelmed that he hadn’t even thought about how difficult that must have been for Sizhui to see. On the way to Jinlintai, he had claimed Sizhui as his son, but he had made the older boy no promise like the one he had given A-Yuan.

“Sizhui,” he murmured, quiet enough that only the boy could hear him. “The promise I made to A-Yuan, yesterday – I hope you know it goes for you too. I’ll always do what I can to come back to you, Sizhui. Always. I’m sorry that I left you before. I won’t do it again. I will always, always try to come back. Okay?”

Sizhui gave a little hitched breath, but he nodded into Wei Wuxian’s chest, his grip tightening around the older man’s robes.

“And don’t worry,” Wei Wuxian added, a little louder. “If things go wrong, Lan Zhan will fling me out of danger, and I’ll drag him with me by the ankles.”

Letting out a little laugh, Sizhui nodded again and pulled back. “Okay, Wei-qianbei.”

“Okay, okay, that’s enough of the Wei-qianbei,” Wei Wuxian said, frowning slightly. “That makes me sound so *old*, and we’re trying to pass you off as our generation – it doesn’t make any sense. Just like I said to Zizhen, Wei Wuxian works just fine.” He smiled wryly at Sizhui. “Xian-gege still works, too.”

Smiling a little tremulously, Sizhui nodded again. He glanced at Lan Zhan, who gave a little nod and held out his arm. Wei Wuxian couldn’t help but grin as Sizhui hugged Lan Zhan tightly, his own arms squeezing A-Yuan a little tighter.

When Sizhui pulled away from Lan Zhan, however, he looked between them again with worry in his eyes. “Are you sure you don’t need any more help? I can stay…”

“We’ll be fine,” Wei Wuxian said. “I need you to look after Shijie and the Wen.”

“We should go now,” said Wen Qing. “The coast is as clear as we’re ever going to get.”

Sishu stepped forward, holding out his arms for A-Yuan, and Wei Wuxian swallowed.

*The sooner this gets started, the sooner it will be over*; he thought, forcing himself to smile.

“Alright, A-Yuan, time to go with Sishu. I’ll see you later, okay?”

A-Yuan wound his fingers into Wei Wuxian’s hair, shaking his head slightly. “A-Yuan stay with A-Die.”

“Not this time,” said Wei Wuxian, pinching A-Yuan’s little nose gently. “But I’ll only be a little while. By bedtime, we’ll both be in Lotus Pier. I’ll be right behind you. And you have your little rabbit to keep you safe, and you have everyone here for company, and you’re going to have such a good adventure you won’t even realise I’m not there.”

A-Yuan scowled at him, so fiercely that Wei Wuxian nearly laughed. “By bedtime? A-Die will be back by bedtime?”

“Yep,” Wei Wuxian promised, and A-Yuan gave a long-suffering sigh, letting Sishu take him.

The second his son left his arms, a shot of panic seized Wei Wuxian’s heart, but he forced himself not to flinch, not to let it show on his face. He might not have been entirely successful, given the way Yanli stepped towards him, kissing his cheek.

“We’ll take good care of him, A-Xian. Don’t worry about us, hm? Just worry about yourself.” She stared at him for a moment, her eyes tight with concern. “Be careful, A-Xian.”

“I will. I promise.”

“Let’s go,” Wen Qing said, and though there was no room in her voice for argument, it was a little softer than usual.

Going against every instinct in his body, Wei Wuxian nodded. He led them down to the gate, Lan Zhan at his side, but as he watched his family and his friends disappear down the path and out of view, his heartbeat faster and faster in his chest.

What was he doing?

What was he *doing*?

That was his family, and he was sending them out alone – Sizhui and Jingyi and Jinling didn’t have swords, and Wen Ning was just one person and someone could take control of him again, and his little A-Yuan was there, and baby Rulan, and Shijie whose cultivation was weak and Wen Qing who hadn’t seen her sword since the war and –

“Wei Ying.” Lan Zhan caught his wrist, holding it fast, and Wei Wuxian was jerked to a stop before he knew he was moving.



“Lan Zhan,” he said, his heart leaping into his throat. “Lan Zhan, let me go –”

“Wei Ying –”

“Let me go!” he yelled, ripping his hand from Lan Zhan’s grip. “I can’t, I can’t do this, I can’t let them go – they’re defenceless, Lan Zhan, they’re-”

“Not defenceless,” Lan Zhan said. “The elders will protect them –”

A wild fear struck Wei Wuxian in the chest, and he whirled around to face Lan Zhan. “And who will protect them from the elders?”

Lan Zhan blinked, his mouth ajar, but then he stepped a little closer to Wei Wuxian, almost hesitantly. “The elders will not hurt them. They will not break faith. Wei Ying – trust me.”

Anger Wei Wuxian had barely even noticed drained out of his chest, and he swallowed. “Lan Zhan... I trust *you*, but I –”

“Trust me,” Lan Zhan said again, more certainly this time. “Shufu brought those I know well. Those I trust. They will not break faith.” He paused. “The sooner the amulet is destroyed, the sooner we re-join them.”

“Lan Zhan, I *can’t*...” Wei Wuxian’s voice broke. “If they’re attacked on the road, if they – Lan Zhan, I can’t.”

“You can,” insisted Lan Zhan. “You said you would.”

“Because I didn’t want Lan Qiren to turn away from us!” Wei Wuxian cried. “Because we needed his help, because – it’s not *fair*, Lan Zhan! I – I made it! I made it so that I could get out of here, so that I could protect the people I cared about, so I – so I wouldn’t be helpless! Without it I, I’m useless! And I have to destroy it because of Jin Guangshan? He’ll just find another reason to target me once it’s gone, anyway! It’s not fair!”

“It isn’t,” Lan Zhan said, stepping closer again. His voice was low and urgent, and Wei Wuxian stepped back. “It is not fair. But you are not helpless.” A desperate laugh broke from Wei Wuxian’s throat, but Lan Zhan stepped forward again, eyes burning with determination. “You are not helpless. You are not alone.”

“So I’m supposed to rely on others for the rest of my life? To hide behind the people I want to protect?” Wei Wuxian demanded. “I can’t do that, Lan Zhan.”

“I would not ask you to. To destroy the amulet is to protect the Wen –”

“For a day! Maybe two, and then Jin Guangshan will come up with something else!”

“It cannot protect you!” Lan Zhan shouted, and Wei Wuxian was so shocked to hear Lan Zhan raise his voice that he froze. Suddenly, as swiftly and surely as though a veil had been ripped away, Wei Wuxian could see anguish on Lan Zhan’s face, and fear in his eyes, and his heart stopped beating. “It cannot protect Wei Ying.” Lan Zhan wasn’t shouting anymore, but his voice was raw and broken and that hurt worse, and he grasped Wei Wuxian’s shoulders.

“It hurts you. We will find other ways. You have made so much else, Wei Ying – things that make the world safer. Better. This does not. It hurts you. If we destroy it now, it cannot endanger the Wen, and it will remove a target from your back.” His grip tightened, almost painfully. “It cannot hurt you again.”

Wei Wuxian swallowed hard, but his voice still came out as a whisper. “Lan Zhan...”

“Please,” Lan Zhan said, his eyes desperate. “Please, Wei Ying.”

“It’s... it’s okay if it hurts me, Lan Zhan,” he began, but Lan Zhan made a noise like a wounded animal, his fingers digging in deeper to Wei Wuxian’s shoulders. “No, it is! I can take it, it’s not –”

“And if it hurts me?” Lan Zhan demanded, and Wei Wuxian flinched, struck hard by the memory of Lan Zhan choking on resentful energy, nearly dying in the dirt – “When you use it, it hurts you. That hurts me. Is that okay?”

It was Wei Wuxian’s turn to choke, and he turned his face away. “That’s not fair, Lan Zhan.”

“Isn’t it? Wei Ying, you said you would destroy it. You know why we should. If you go back on your word now, you will lose the trust of my Shufu and of Jin Zixuan, and when you use it, it will hurt you, and it will hurt me. It couldn’t protect the Wen, Wei Ying, not in the life Sizhui knew. Then, it only made things worse. With just half of it, Xue Yang and Jin Guangyao did terrible things. Please, Wei Ying. Please.”

For a long moment, Wei Wuxian couldn’t speak. He couldn’t look back at Lan Zhan, either. He couldn’t bear that awful look on his face. When his voice came back to him, it was rougher than he would have liked. “I’m pretty sure that emotional manipulation is against the rules, Lan Zhan.”

“It is not forbidden to speak the truth. Have I done otherwise?”

Wei Wuxian could feel his resolve breaking. He shuddered, closing his eyes. “Lan Zhan...”

“Wei Ying. *Please.*”

“Urgh! Fine! Fine. But when we get attacked later and I can’t do anything about it, I will definitely be saying *‘I told you so,’* Lan Zhan.”

A soft sigh of relief left Lan Zhan’s lips, and Wei Wuxian risked a glance back at him. He looked a little calmer now that Wei Wuxian had agreed with him, but his eyes were still tight with concern. “It will not happen,” he said. “Wei Ying is not useless.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Wei Wuxian grumbled. “We can argue about that later. Let’s just get this over with, okay?”

Lan Zhan nodded, and they trudged back up the path together. Well, Wei Wuxian trudged, and he threw a glance over his shoulder every few paces, too. Lan Zhan moved as gracefully as ever, practically gliding over the ground. He did not look back.

They made their way up to the Demon Subdue Palace. The quietness around them was complete – there wasn't even a wind to whisper through the trees, and the usual sounds of life provided by the Wen were utterly gone.

Wei Wuxian stopped in the courtyard, and pulled the Stygian Tiger Amulet from his sleeve. His heart hammered against his ribcage, and he took a deep breath, staring down at it. It wasn't like he hadn't considered getting rid of it before. It wasn't like he didn't know how to.

It wasn't like he didn't know the risks...

"Lan Zhan... Will you wait outside the wards?" he asked, voice trembling. He was afraid that he already knew the answer, but he continued nevertheless. "If this goes wrong, there's a chance the amulet will just explode, and there's so much resentful energy inside it... If that happens there'll be nothing you can do, and it will kill you, too."

"I will not. That will not happen." Lan Zhan took Wei Wuxian's wrist, more gently this time, waiting until Wei Wuxian met his eyes before he continued speaking. "Do not let that happen, Wei Ying."

*Well I wouldn't if I could help it,* Wei Wuxian thought, but as he met Lan Zhan's eyes the only word he could say aloud was, "Okay." He took another deep breath and glanced at the door to the palace. "Will you wait out here then? Please? Even if everything goes perfectly, the amount of energy... It can't hurt me the way it hurts you. Not without a golden core. I can put a ward across the door, keep the worst of it away from you – but if something goes wrong, you'd be close enough to grab me. Please?"

Lan Zhan hesitated, discomfort screaming from his face. "On one condition. The telepathy spell."

Wei Wuxian blinked. "The one you used in the cave? When we were battling the Xuanwu?"

Lan Zhan nodded. "If you are playing Chenqing you will not be able to call for help if you need it. This way I will know."

Really, Wei Wuxian had expected to have more of an argument about this, so he nodded. "Okay. Unless – will it work, Lan Zhan? Without a core?"

"I will cast the spell. It will work," Lan Zhan promised, and without another second's pause he cast the spell. Wei Wuxian held his breath, and a second later he heard Lan Zhan speak without moving his lips. *This will work.*

The thought came with such determination that Wei Wuxian couldn't help but laugh slightly. He knew Lan Zhan didn't just mean the spell – he could feel every facet of the determination behind the words. Destroying the amulet would work. Protecting the Wen would work. Finding his brother would work.

Unable to help himself, Wei Wuxian entwined his fingers through Lan Zhan's, willing his thoughts into the other man's head. *I love you.*

*I love you, too*, Lan Zhan thought back at once, and if Wei Wuxian had doubted before that it would have been impossible to do so anymore. It was overwhelming, the adoration that accompanied the words, and Wei Wuxian's head spun slightly.

*We shouldn't do this too often*, he thought. *My poor heart's too weak for such affection.*

Lan Zhan frowned at him, his lips parting, but then something steeled in his eyes. *It's time, Wei Ying.*

"Yeah, yeah, I know," Wei Wuxian grumbled. He paused, and then kissed Lan Zhan quickly. "Just in case it goes wrong, okay?"

Smiling as best he could, Wei Wuxian took a step towards the cave, but Lan Zhan's hand tightened around his and tugged him back, and then Lan Zhan was kissing him with a desperation that broke his heart, even as it soared. Lan Zhan's arms wrapped around him, pulling him closer, and somehow the kiss grew even deeper, even more desperate.

"Don't," Lan Zhan whispered, pulling his lips from Wei Wuxian's just long enough to speak. "Don't let it go wrong. Please."

*Oh, Lan Zhan*, Wei Wuxian thought, and Lan Zhan shuddered, his grip tightening. *I won't. It's going to be okay. Come on, you're right – it's time. Let's get it over and done with.*

Reluctantly, Lan Zhan let go of him and nodded, and Wei Wuxian tightened his hand around the amulet. Steeling himself, he walked into the cave that had been his home for nearly two years and cast a ward across the doorway. The door itself remained open, but the ward was strong, and glowed a soft red. He could still see Lan Zhan through it, and he offered a smile and a wave before he moved deeper into the palace, making his way to the Blood Pool.

It didn't look like his home anymore, not with all his belongings gone. There were a few little finger paintings on the wall from A-Yuan, and his oh-so-comfortable straw mattress, but every other sign of life was gone, and the Demon Subdue Palace felt cold again. As he came to the Blood Pool, he thought it looked cruel again.

He placed the amulet on the edge of the pool, and raised Chenqing to his lips. Theoretically, if the resentful energy was too unstable he could siphon it from the amulet into the water – that, at least, would contain the energy to a point where it was less likely to explode. He hoped.

*Alright, Lan Zhan*, he thought, *time to concentrate...*

Lan Zhan sent only two words back. *Be careful.*

Wei Wuxian closed his eyes, and began to play. He wouldn't have the energy to destroy the amulet himself. He wasn't sure that anyone ever would. But it certainly had enough power to destroy itself, so that was what he had to use.

Even so, he could feel his own energy draining from him as he played, the resent that pooled where his core had once been pouring into his music instead, giving itself over to the Stygian

Tiger Amulet. With every inhale, it was replaced by resent from the amulet, coursing through his body to burst out as he exhaled, and soon, Wei Wuxian could taste the iron tang of blood in his mouth.

Then, the screaming started. He was used to its faraway echo in his ears, but now it was louder, shriller, fiercer, and it hurt. Screwing his eyes shut tighter, Wei Wuxian continued to play, and the screaming grew louder, and sharper.

*Wei Ying!* Lan Zhan thought desperately, and oh – he could hear the screaming too.

*Its fine,* Wei Wuxian thought back, trying to keep his pain detached from his thoughts. It was harder than it would be with words, but he didn't need Lan Zhan to know that it felt like needles were stabbing into his ears, like his body was burning as the paths between his meridians were scorched by resentful energy far stronger than any he had battled before.

He would be fine. He just had to play.

A hand closed around his throat.

Wei Wuxian's eyes flew open to a world of black smoke, and before him a shape was forming – a body attached to the hand that was tightening around his neck, a face that was terrifyingly familiar. Narrowing his eyes, Wei Wuxian shifted into a different tune, forcing the resentful energy away from him, forcing it back –

*Wei Ying -*

*Stay there!* Wei Wuxian ordered silently. He had known this might happen, that the energy trapped in the amulet might leak out as it was destroyed, and he had a plan for it. He'd just been too distracted by the screaming that he'd forgotten to open his eyes.

He wouldn't forget again.

His song grew quicker, stronger, and the smoke came together to form an orb circling above the Blood Pool, sinking in and out of the red water. On the edge of the pool, one half of the amulet had already collapsed in on itself, cracked almost beyond recognition. The other was spinning wildly, black smoke pouring out of it and into the orb.

The shrieking grew louder, the pain in his ears white-hot and searing, and Wei Wuxian could feel his body begin to tremble. He forced himself to concentrate, to keep pouring himself into the music.

*It's almost done,* he promised Lan Zhan. *Almost done.*

*Wei Ying,* came the reply, carrying with it relief and fear and love so strong that Wei Wuxian almost smiled.

With a sound like shrieking steel, the second half of the amulet shattered, and the orb of resentful energy swelled until it filled the cave –

And Wei Wuxian calmed the music, and called the ghosts to rest, and the orb sank into the Blood Pool. The water rose up to meet it, its red growing deeper and thicker, until there was no black smoke left to see, and not a drop of the Blood Pool that could be mistaken for water.

Wei Wuxian lowered Chenqing, and his knees gave out beneath him. They hit the stone hard, and he coughed into his sleeve. When he glanced down, his sleeve was covered in blood.

*Wonderful*, he thought grumpily, though it wasn't exactly unexpected.

*What? Wei Ying, what's wrong?* Lan Zhan thought urgently, and Wei Wuxian smiled wearily.

*Nothing*, he thought back, reaching out to the broken shards of metal. He scooped them into a little bag tenderly – Jin Guangshan would want proof, and it hurt, somewhat, to see the Stygian amulet just lying there. *Nothing is wrong at –*

Above him, something cracked. Wei Wuxian froze. He could hear Lan Zhan calling his name in his mind, but he couldn't reply as he looked up at the ceiling of the cave.

At the deep, crumbling break in the stone.

Beneath him, the ground began to rumble, and the blood swirled in the Blood Pool, moving faster even than a waterborne abyss, and lines appeared on the walls around him, splintering up in red and black and breaking the rock beneath them, and Wei Wuxian thought, *Oh, shit!*

It was coming down. The palace was coming down, the stone surrendering to the insane amount of resentful energy within the Blood Pool, and Wei Wuxian dragged himself to his feet, stumbling towards the entrance.

*Stay there!* He commanded Lan Zhan. *The cave's falling in, stay there, stay there!*

Rock shattered on the ground beside him, falling in from the ceiling, and the cave groaned. Wei Wuxian staggered forward, his eyes fixed on the door. He could get there. He could make it. He would –

A hunk of stone caught him on the shoulder and he fell, the air knocked from his lungs by the impact. Another shard of ceiling shattered just an inch from his face, and he cringed, grabbing at the stone tile beneath him to drag himself forward –

And a pair of arms wrapped around his chest and lifted him off the ground.

*I am here*, Lan Zhan thought firmly, needlessly, because who else could it be dragging him to the door fast enough to be flying? A sob broke from Wei Wuxian's aching throat, a sob of pain or relief or fear, he didn't know, and he grabbed at Lan Zhan's arms tightly.

Together they burst out of the door and into the courtyard, and a moment later the door collapsed behind them. Wei Wuxian didn't see it fall, though, because Lan Zhan was on the ground, pulling him into his lap and taking his face in his hands.

"Wei Ying," he said, staring at him in horror.

“What?” Wei Wuxian croaked. “Do I look that bad?”

Lan Zhan ran his thumbs over Wei Wuxian’s cheeks, and beneath his ears, and swallowed. “You are bleeding.”

“Oh... eyes?”

Lan Zhan shook his head. “Your ears...”

“Ah, that makes sense,” Wei Wuxian closed his eyes, letting himself slump against Lan Zhan’s chest. “It was loud.”

Lan Zhan pulled him close. “You are hurt.”

“I’ll survive,” Wei Wuxian promised, wrapping an arm around Lan Zhan and nestling closer. It was surprisingly difficult – his arms felt more like leaden noodles than they did limbs, but it was worth it. It was worth it. “Thank you, Lan Zhan.”

He felt Lan Zhan shake his head, felt him press his lips to Wei Wuxian’s hair. *Wei Ying*, he thought, and he still sounded so afraid that Wei Wuxian opened his eyes, shifting to look at Lan Zhan’s face.

“Hey,” he murmured. “I’m okay. I’m okay. Just tired. And sore. And achy. But by tonight we’ll be back with the others and Wen Qing can jab me full of her horrible needles and make it all better, okay?”

“Okay,” Lan Zhan whispered.

Wei Wuxian glanced over at the rubble that had, until this morning, been his front door. “Damn... We really don’t have too much luck with caves, do we Lan Zhan?”

Lan Zhan’s face darkened, and he pulled Wei Wuxian tight against his chest. “Too soon to joke.”

Wei Wuxian let out a weak huff of a laugh, but he also nodded. “Okay, Lan Zhan. I think, I think I need a minute before we move. Is that okay?”

“Mn,” said Lan Zhan at once, resting his chin on Wei Wuxian’s head. It was, Wei Wuxian decided, the most comfortable he had ever been in his life.

“Would...” he paused, not wanting Lan Zhan to think he was teasing. “Would you sing for me?”

“Mn,” Lan Zhan said again. His voice was trembling a little as he started to hum, but it grew stronger as he went on, repeating a gentle chorus of the song he had sung in the cave of the Xuanwu – the song that always made Wei Wuxian’s heart soar and his mind calm. The one he would play to A-Yuan, on nights when nothing else would get him to sleep.

“So what is it called then?” Wei Wuxian asked, when the song lulled for the third time.

For a long moment, Lan Zhan said nothing. Then, his cheeks a little pink, he said, “Wangxian.”

Wei Wuxian couldn’t help it. A little squeal of wonder and delight burst from his chest, aggravating his aching throat as it did, but he didn’t care, pushing back from Lan Zhan’s lap to meet his eyes.

“Really?”

“That is what I told you in the cave,” said Lan Zhan, nodding. He was studying Wei Wuxian’s face carefully, and Wei Wuxian beamed.

“Lan Zhan! You wrote me a song?” When Lan Zhan nodded, Wei Wuxian’s smile grew so strong it hurt his cheeks. He pointed at his own chest. “For me? This Wei Wuxian right here?”

“Only you,” Lan Zhan said, and Wei Wuxian kissed him.

“You,” he said, “are the best. The best person in the whole, entire world.”

“Inaccurate,” Lan Zhan said, his ears blazing red, and Wei Wuxian kissed him again.

“Nope, utterly true. I never lie.”

Lan Zhan kissed him back, but then pulled away. “*That* is a lie.”

Wei Wuxian grinned, but then a thought occurred from him, and he glanced at Lan Zhan. “Is that all you told me? In the cave? The name of the song?”

Lan Zhan looked at him suspiciously, and then nodded once. Wei Wuxian grinned again, pulling himself back into Lan Zhan’s lap. Lan Zhan let him, encasing him in his arms once again. It felt good to know that he hadn’t actually slept through a whole heartfelt confession with actual words – this way any of those would happen when he could remember them.

Also, this left room for more teasing.

“I hope you know, Lan Zhan, that even if I had been conscious for that there is no way I would have connected those dots. I am far too dense for that. Just ask Jiang Cheng. You have to spell these things out for me.”

Lan Zhan hummed, and then said, “I love Wei Ying. More than anything.”

“Lan Zhan!” he protested, but Lan Zhan leant down and kissed him, and Wei Wuxian quite forgot that he was protesting at all.



Thank you so much for reading! I hope you enjoyed it - please do let me know what you thought.

As a quick note, tomorrow I'll be going back to work after lockdown, so updates may be a little slower. I'm going to do my best to stick to every other day, but that may fall through here and there, so I thank you in advance for your patience :) Until next time, please take care!

## Chapter 20

### Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for all your comments and support! I'm afraid I'm a day late - sorry about that! I'm quite tired tonight so I very much hope there aren't any typos in this - feel free to point them out if there are so I can fix them :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It would be an understatement to say that Zizhen was nervous as they were ushered through the halls of Jinlintai. His mouth felt very dry, and his heart was racing far too fast, and he had to focus more than he would have liked on putting on foot in front of the other so he didn't trip. In front of him, Jiang Wanyin, Jin Zixuan, and Lan Qiren walked with purpose, apparently unconcerned with the guards that had surrounded them the second they landed. Behind him were Lu Meilin and Jingyi's parents. A-Yu was silent on his father's hip. Zizhen wondered if even he could pick up on the seriousness of the situation.

Just seconds after they landed, one of the guards had told Jin Zixuan that the clan leaders were gathering to prepare a siege of the Burial Mounds. The first thought to race through Zizhen's mind had been "*Well, that didn't take long,*" but it was quickly replaced by sheer panic. If the other clans were already readying for war, what chance did they have to stop it? Forcefully, Zizhen reminded himself that it didn't matter – even if the clans were somehow to reach the Burial Mounds today, there would be no one there for them to attack. The others must have left by now – they should be well on their way down the river. They would be okay.

Zizhen wished that he was with them. He understood why someone had to go, and he understood why it had to be him. He just... hated it. What if he wasn't a good enough liar to pull this off? He'd never told a lie even close to this sort of scale – what if he couldn't do it? What if he blew it for everyone, what if he said something stupid and everything came crashing down?

*You just need to not say anything at all,* he thought firmly. *Nothing except the answers to the questions you're asked. Otherwise, keep quiet. We have a plan.*

He took a deep breath, and gripped Suibian tighter. Suibian, that Wei Wuxian had loaned him with a cheery smile, as though it was nothing more than a prop, as though it wasn't a sword bound to his very soul. As overwhelming as that was, it was also strangely comforting, and Zizhen grasped that feeling as tightly as he grasped the sword itself.

They were led into a large hall, and Zizhen had to work very hard at remembering how, exactly, he was supposed to breathe. The tables set up in the hall were filled with clan leaders – some he knew, and many he didn't. Almost instantly, he caught sight of his father, and

swallowed hard. He was sitting beside Yao-zongzhu, of course, and to Zizhen's relief, his attention seemed to be fixed on Lan Qiren. Zizhen knew it was too much to ask that his father not look at him at all, but he hoped that the men in front of him would hold his focus for a while. Zizhen loved his father, fiercely, but he hadn't been lying when he said that he wanted to wait to speak with him. His father wasn't very good at listening. Especially not to Zizhen.

Making himself look away, Zizhen glanced over the other men gathered, spying Nie Huaisang sitting beside another, taller man, who he guessed had to be Nie Mingjue. He wasn't quite what Zizhen had been expecting – he had never met Nie Mingjue before, and had always imagined a burlier version of Nie Huaisang. He *was* burlier, of course, by no small amount, but they didn't look alike at all, save perhaps for something in their eyes. A strange feeling twisted in Zizhen's chest as he glanced at Nie Huaisang. This wasn't a man who had spent the last decade plotting revenge for the death of his brother, a man so utterly defeated he would plunge a knife into his chest for the sake of a boy he barely knew. It was a man little older than he was, who had little to no idea of what was going on. And still, his name was burnt into the skin of Zizhen's forearm. Still, Zizhen was grateful.

Nie Huaisang may be a stranger again, but Zizhen owed him his life.

Abruptly, Zizhen was aware that they had stopped walking, and he looked to the front of the room. Over Jiang Wanyin's shoulder, he could see a golden throne, with a man who could only be Jin Guangshan sitting upon it.

"Jin-zongzhu," Jin Zixuan said, bowing, and on either side of him Jiang Wanyin and Lan Qiren did the same. Zizhen followed suit, his heart pounding in his chest.

"Zixuan," Jin Guangshan replied. Perhaps Zizhen was imagining it because of all the horrible things he had heard, but he thought the man sounded almost disappointed to see his son standing before him. "What a relief – however did you escape?"

"There was nothing to escape from," said Jin Zixuan. "I left Jinlintai of my own account, for the sake of my son's safety. I told Muqin to inform you of such. I hear from the guards that you intend to march on the Burial Mounds – I assure you, Jin-zongzhu, that you have no need to."

"Zixuan," said Jin Guangshan again, with the air of someone explaining something to a small child. "Zixun told us all what happened at the pass. Whatever bewitchment or enchantment the Yiling Patriarch used upon you, we shall lift it."

"I am not 'bewitched,'" Jin Zixuan said sharply. "Wei Wuxian has done me no harm. There is no justification whatsoever to launch an attack on him now."

A ripple of whispers ran through the room, and Yao-zongzhu opened his mouth, because of course he did. "The Yiling Patriarch is a murderer, and a master of demonic cultivation! I do not know, Jin-gongzi, how you can say there is no justification – he kidnapped a child of Gusu Lan, and lured the sons and grandson of Jin-zongzhu straight from Jinlintai! He was invited as a guest, and instead murdered the cultivators who offered to escort him in, and his evil–"

“Escort him?” said Jin Zixuan sharply, his gaze snapping to his cousin. “Is that what you told them, Zixun? That you meant to ‘escort him’ to Jinlintai? If that is what you were told, clan leaders, then you were lied to. Jin Zixun ambushed Wei Wuxian in Qiongg Pass, because he wrongly assumed that Wei Wuxian cast a curse on him. He took a hundred cultivators to butcher my wife’s beloved shidi after we invited him to our son’s one-month celebration. It was my belief that the invitation was to Jinlintai – not to his death.”

“That was the belief of Gusu Lan,” said Lan Qiren before anyone else could speak, his voice rumbling throughout the room with a weight and authority that made Zizhen very, very happy he was on their side. “To ambush one you had offered an invitation to is highly dishonourable, especially without good reason. Before we speak more of it, however, I would address the disappearance of Lan Yu, the child you claim Wei Wuxian kidnapped. It is true he disappeared from his home the night before last, but Wei Wuxian had nothing to do with it.”

At that, Lan Haoran stepped forward, putting A-Yu on the ground beside him to bow low to the clan leaders. Little A-Yu copied him, a look of intense concentration on his face – until he got distracted by the patterns on the floor tiles.

“Ooh, pretty!” he cooed quietly, and Zizhen pursed his lips to keep from snickering.

“My name is Lan Haoran – this is my son, Lan Yu,” said Lan Haoran, taking his son’s hand. “I am afraid that I caused my mother and my clan undue fright. The night before last, my wife and I returned from a night hunt later than we expected. As our clan’s disciplines forbid entry to Cloud Recesses after seven o’clock, we decided to take a room in an inn in Caiyi...” He paused, his cheeks going slightly red as he gave an embarrassed smile. “Unfortunately, during the course of the hunt I hit my head rather badly, and I woke in a bit of a daze in the middle of the night. In truth I don’t really remember what I was thinking, other than a fear that A-Yu was in trouble, and a need to get to him. Then I had him in my arms, but Liling was not there, and I couldn’t remember where she was, so I took A-Yu to search for her... By the time I came to my senses it was morning, and I was already closer to Lanling than I was Gusu. I knew Lan-zongzhu would be in Jinlintai for the celebrations, and sought to reunite with him there.” Here, the man’s smile grew wry. Zizhen had no idea that anyone from the Lan clan could be so good an actor – but then he supposed this was Jingyi’s father. “A-Yu was too grumpy to go all the way back home without breakfast.”

“We just didn’t even stop for food!” said A-Yu, looking so put out that some of the clan leaders softened slightly. Zizhen saw Nie Huaisang hide a smile behind his fan.

“However,” Lan Haoran said, his expression shifting into one of discomfort. “On the way I was distracted by the chaos at Qiongg Pass. From what I saw and heard, it was most definitely intended as an ambush targeting Wei-gongzi. Given the seriousness of the situation, I allowed Wen Ning to take A-Yu to the Burial Mounds, where we believed he would be safe, and escorted Wei-gongzi and Jin-gongzi to Jinlintai myself.”

“You mean to tell us that you kidnapped your own son, and then surrendered him to the Ghost General?” Jin Guangshan’s voice was as close to a sneer as he could get without sounding appallingly rude, and it made the hair on the back of Zizhen’s neck stand up.

Lan Haoran stood his ground. “I would not say I kidnapped him – he is my son. But I did remove him from my mother’s care without properly informing her, for which I assure you I have already apologised profusely. We only came to be involved with Wei-gongzi by coincidence. And I allowed Wen Qionglin to take care of my son because I did not know much of the situation in Jinlintai. Jin Zixuan feared for his son, and I was concerned there may have been a fight, if people in Lanling were plotting against their own sect heir. I met Wen Ning when he came to Gusu for the lectures – he seemed a decent man then, and still very much so now.”

The whispers that had run around the room at the words ‘murder of their own sect heir’ were still rushing around as Lan Haoran stopped speaking, and Jin Guangshan’s cheeks flared red.

“How dare you imply that-”

“Is that not what happened?” said Jin Zixuan sharply, and his father stared at him. “Because someone planted another demonic cultivator in the hills to take control of Wen Ning from Wei Wuxian, and anyone smart enough to do that would know full well it could mean death for anyone in that pass. Yet I was directed to go there, without being informed of the other man’s presence. What is that, if not an attempt on my life?” He paused for a moment, letting the words sink in, but before anyone could respond, he looked over his shoulder and beckoned Zizhen to his side. “This is Wei Zizhen of Yunmeng Jiang. He is a cousin of Wei Wuxian’s, and it’s only thanks to the fact that he and his friends were passing by that I am alive at all. Wei-gongzi, would you relay to the clan leaders what you saw?”

Zizhen swallowed and nodded, bowing carefully before he began to speak. “We were on our way back from a night hunt, my friends and I,” he said. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see his father staring at him, but he avoided meeting his eyes. “When we got to Qionggong pass we saw... we saw a man standing in the hills, playing a flute. We could hear shouting and fighting, and the sound of another flute and we ran to see what was happening. As soon as we got around the corner we saw Jin Zixun and Jin Zixuan and Wei Wuxian, and then we saw Wen Ning coming down from the hill above. I knew Wei Wuxian was in trouble – he wouldn’t use demonic cultivation against other people unless it was an emergency. And Wen Ning – Wen Ning looked strange, like he wasn’t in control of what he was doing, and we realised that the man with the other flute had to be the one in control. Wen Ning was aiming for Jin Zixuan, but we managed to knock him out of the way, and the other flautist stopped playing when Wei Wuxian did, so Wen Ning was able to come to. And he told us that he had heard two flutes.”

“Did you recognise him?” demanded Nie Mingjue. “The man on the hill?”

Zizhen took a deep breath, glancing at Jiang Wanyin as if to ask his permission. When ‘his’ clan leader nodded, so did Zizhen.

“It was Su-zongzhu.”

This time, the reacting sect leaders didn’t even bother to whisper. Su She was noticeably absent from their ranks.

Jin Zixun had to shout to be heard above the racket. “You’re lying!”

“Lying?” replied Jin Zixuan sharply, before Zizhen could think of what to say. “Are you saying it was someone else on the hill? There was certainly someone there – Luo Fang and Wang Liejie found evidence of that, and you witnessed them report it. So do you wish to defend Su She, now, Zixun?”

“I don’t know who he saw, or who he thinks he saw!” snapped Jin Zixun, glaring at Zizhen. “Perhaps it was Su She, perhaps it wasn’t. But he is no cousin of Wei Wuxian – Wei Wuxian had no idea who he was!”

Oh – oh, Zizhen hadn’t thought of that – he’d forgotten that Zixun had seen those first moments of confusion and introductions. He shook his head slightly, partly to deny the man’s words, and partly to try and keep focus as he strung together a lie that sounded like a correction. “He didn’t know my friends, or what we were doing there, and my back was to him until I was sure the archers on the hill weren’t going to kill him. It was very confusing. We didn’t really put all the pieces of what happened together until afterwards.”

“Wei Wuxian had only met one of the other boys before, a cousin of Yanli’s, and that had been a long time ago, when the boy was much younger,” Jin Zixuan took over, and Zizhen did his best not to let his sigh of relief be too obvious. “I met him too, and I admit it took me a moment to recognise him. Yu Jinling’s parents passed away a few months ago, and he has had quite the growth spurt since then. That is why he hugged me, Zixun, if you’re going to ask that question.”

“Yu Jinling?” echoed Yao-zongzhu disbelievingly, and Jin Zixuan smiled a little.

“In truth, it’s where my wife got the idea for A-Ling’s name from. When he was born, A-Ling looked an awful lot like her cousin. In any case, he’d grown, and Wei Wuxian didn’t recognise him, and I don’t think he can be blamed for being bewildered in a moment like that.”

“I’ve never heard of a Wei Zizhen!” Jin Zixun pushed, his lip curled up, and Zizhen prayed that his fear wouldn’t show on his face.

“Why would you have?” said Jiang Wanyin, glaring at the other man. “Zizhen’s a good disciple, but he’s too young to have fought in the war and he’s not a part of the main family. What cause would you have to know his name? Besides, Wei Changze was born into the Yunmeng Jiang clan – he didn’t spring out of nowhere!”

“You’re deflecting, Zixun,” said Jin Zixuan coldly. “Because you are in the wrong. You ambushed Wei Wuxian. You broke your word, and brought dishonour on yourself and on Lanling Jin. You did so because you believed cast the hundred holes curse on you – I am certain that he did not. But after what I saw in the Burial Mounds, I fully believe that you deserve such a curse, Jin Zixun.”

Gasps and chokes rang out across the room, and Jin Zixun’s mouth fell open.

“Shufu!” he cried, looking to Jin Guangshan and pointing at Jin Zixun. “I told you, he was possessed –”

“I am not possessed,” said Jin Zixuan. He was staring straight ahead, but it was clear that he was addressing the room, and not his father, as he spoke. “I wonder if the clan leaders are aware that the Wen Jin-zongzhu imprisoned in the camps at Qiongqi Pass were not cultivators, but refugees – that many of them had been forced from their homes by Wen Chao even before the war. I wonder if the clan leaders are aware that these people were tortured and tormented beyond any reasonable level of punishment – if the clan leaders are aware that there were *children* in those camps. That of those children, only one survived.”

“Zixuan,” said Jin Guangshan, and Zizhen’s stomach curled in horror. He was smiling. “Of course those who escaped would say such things. They were war criminals who fled custody – they are not likely to admit their guilt to you.”

“I too have heard the testimony of the Wen,” said Lan Qiren, steel in his eyes. “I believe it is known I am not one to let sentiment interfere with my judgement. After what I was told, and the physical evidence I was shown, I would find the treatment the Wen received appalling if they were cultivators who had killed our people. Having seen them, I highly doubt any of them were. Most are old, and few of them can cultivate at all. One of them is only three years old.” He paused, letting A-Yuan’s age hang in the air for a moment. “I do not think I could be accused of having ever liked Wei Wuxian. His behaviour is often a disgrace, and his use of demonic cultivation troubles me. However, in this instance, I believe that the actions he took upon discovering the camps were both righteous and merciful.”

“Merciful?” spluttered a familiar voice, and Zizhen’s toes curled in his shoes. He glanced across the room at his father. “Lan-qianbei, would you really label the murder of our cultivators as merciful?”

“Compared to what those cultivators did to those in their custody, it was mercy,” said Lan Qiren, his eyes flashing. He was glaring at Jin Guangshan with such fury it was a wonder the other man wasn’t quailing. “I would not have believed that Lanling Jin could be capable of such abject cruelty, had I not seen the evidence myself. I wonder if Jin Guangshan was aware of the behaviour of the guards at Qiongqi Pass, and I must wonder, too, if he was aware in advance of the ambush that took place yesterday. I wonder if he knew of the threat that Su She posed to Jin Zixuan.”

Jin Guangshan’s eyes widened, shock and fury flashing across his face. “How dare you? Lan Qiren, you dare accuse me of plotting to murder my own son? Zixuan wasn’t even supposed to be there!”

Lan Qiren did not flinch. “I accused you of nothing. I only asked if you were aware of the threat. Now, I see you clearly *did* now about the ambush ahead of time.”

Zizhen couldn’t help his eyes from widening slightly, though he did manage not to grin. He hadn’t expected that Lan Qiren would be the one to trick Jin Guangshan into admitting that the attack on Wei Wuxian was planned.

And Lan Qiren was not finished. “Wangji wrote the invitation to Wei Wuxian on the understanding that he would be unharmed. As such, Gusu Lan take offence that such an attack would be planned and sanctioned without consulting us first. Furthermore, in regard to the camps, I propose a formal investigation into their running.”

Jin Zixun balked, blotches of red appearing on his cheeks. “A formal investigation? On the word of a couple of Wen dogs?” His voice was thick with disbelief, and his face was twisted into an expression of betrayal and hate as he looked at Jin Zixuan. “You would believe their words over mine, *cousin*? You would say I deserve to have a hundred holes in my chest based on *their* pathetic accusations?”

But for Jin Zixun, talking had been a mistake. Jin Zixuan’s eyes fixed on him, dark and furious.

“Jin Zixun,” he said, his voice trembling with rage, “did you forget that you branded your *personal sigil* onto the bodies of the women you raped?” Several of the clan leaders recoiled at that – Zizhen saw Nie Huaisang’s eyes widen in horror in the split second before they disappeared behind his fan, and Nie Mingjue sat up even straighter, his fists clenching.

For his own part, Zizhen’s stomach was squirming, roiling with horror and disgust, and he gripped Suibian tighter. It only got worse when Jin Zixun made an expression of vague recognition, as though he *had* forgotten, as though he had done such horrible, terrible things and then just *forgotten* it like it was nothing.

Jin Zixun gave an awkward scoff, and looked towards his uncle. “Shufu... they were just Wen dogs.”

Nie Mingjue stood up, and the room held its breath. The rage on the man’s face promised violence, and he looked unmoveable as a mountain. It was very impressive. Zizhen wondered how on earth people could have looked between him and Wei Wuxian and dubbed the latter scarier.

“I second the proposal of Lan-xiansheng,” Nie-zongzhu thundered. “For a formal investigation of these camps. The understanding of Qinghe Nie was that the surviving Wen civilians would be kept under supervision – not that they would be subjected to torture and death. It did not occur to me that I should have to *specify* that children should not be punished for the crimes of their parents. If it is true that there truly were children in those camps –” He broke off, the strength of his silence a greater threat than any Zizhen could have come up with. Several of the clan leaders grew pale, and Zizhen noticed that his father and Yao-zongzhu both looked very uncomfortable. After a moment, Nie Mingjue turned to face Lan Qiren, inclining his head respectfully. Respect covered the anger in his voice when he spoke again. “Lan-xiansheng, where is Xichen? He would not stand for this.”

“He would not. But we do not know where he is,” said Lan Qiren, his eyes snapping back onto Jin Guangshan. “Zewu-Jun was not with us at the Burial Mounds. The last time he was seen, he was with Jin Guangyao. Of course, they are sworn brothers. But it was Jin Guangyao who told Jin Zixuan of the planned ambush, and he is a known associate of Su She. I am concerned, therefore, that the wellbeing of Lan-zongzhu may be at stake. Jin-zongzhu – do you know where he is?”

Every eye in the room turned to Jin Guangshan, and Zizhen held his breath.

“Guangyao was not to tell Zixuan of anything!” Jin Guangshan said tightly, and his attempt to calculate how to shift the blame onto his son was so obvious anyone could see it. Zizhen



might have felt sorry for Jin Guangyao, if he hadn't spent the entire night plagued by nightmares of tight chains, and cold cells, and the anguished screams of his friends. "His treachery will not go unpunished – this was clearly a grab for power. But this is an internal matter for Lanling Jin, and it has nothing to do with Zewu Jun. I don't know where he is – why would I? Whatever that bastard of mine has done, it is not with my blessing!"

"The ambush was," said Jin Zixuan. "Though you are right – the attempt on my life is an internal matter for Lanling Jin to discuss. The attack on Wei Wuxian, however, is not, and nor is the situation with the Wen. Assuming that no secondary attack on my brother-in-law is eminent, I think the most pressing issue is the whereabouts of Zewu Jun, and secondly of Jin Guangyao and Su She. They must be brought to account."

"Wei Wuxian still has the Stygian Tiger Amulet!" Jin Zixun spat out, clearly grabbing at straws. Zizhen bit down on his lip to keep from smirking – that was not a good straw to be grabbing.

Jiang Wanyin did not bother to hide the curl of his own lips. "Wei Wuxian and Hanguang Jun are destroying the amulet as we speak. My brother agrees with the judgement of Jin-zongzhu that the Stygian Tiger Amulet is far too powerful for one man to command. When the task is done, he will gladly provide the clans with the evidence, if you do not want to trust to the integrity of Hanguang Jun."

"He's destroying it?" said Nie Mingjue, his eyes narrowing again. "Willingly?"

Jiang Wanyin nodded. He took a deep breath, so subtly Zizhen wouldn't have noticed if they were not standing so close, and he remembered that this Jiang-zongzhu was still new to the position. He was not the experienced clan leader Zizhen knew – not yet.

"Yes," Jiang Wanyin said, raising his chin slightly. His fingers were white around his sword, but his voice was steady. "Wei Wuxian... he has never hesitated to risk everything he has in the protection of others. He never will. He has saved my life more times than I can count, and he's saved the lives of most people in this room. Without him, we wouldn't have defeated the Wen in the first place. All he wants to do is protect people. He left the Jiang sect because he wished to protect us from the backlash of defending the Wen. He..." Jiang Wanyin faltered for a moment, and Zizhen saw his eyes flicker momentarily to Jin Zixuan, and then Lan Qiren. Backup, Zizhen realised, and he wondered just how alone Jiang Wanyin must have felt before. "He was right to rescue the Wen. And I was wrong for not standing beside him. I will not make that mistake again. I want it known, officially, that Wei Wuxian is under the protection of Yunmeng Jiang, and any further baseless attempt on his life will be taken as an act of war."

Yet another wave of gasps made their way around the room. Zizhen thought he could see a smile in Nie Huaisang's eyes, though of course his face was still hidden by his fan, and Nie Mingjue was staring at Jiang Wanyin with what looked like a glare of contemplation. After a long moment, he spoke again.

"If Wei Wuxian is destroying the amulet, I see no need for this council," he said. "There is no need to march on the Burial Mounds. We will leave Lanling Jin to their own internal affairs –

Jiang-zongzhu, Lan-xiansheng, Jin-gongzi, might I ask you to join me to discuss Xichen's whereabouts?"

"Certainly," said Lan Qiren, and Jiang Wanyin and Jin Zixuan inclined their heads.

"Very well." Nie Mingjue turned towards Jin Guangshan, and gave a shallow bow. "Thank you for your hospitality, Jin-zongzhu." Then, he turned. "Huaisang, we're leaving."

Delight shot through Zizhen as he realised that Nie Mingjue meant to leave now, right this second, and his glee grew as Lan Qiren, Jin Zixuan, and Jiang Wanyin all gave shallow bows of their own, and made to follow him out. Zizhen followed quickly, Haoran and Liling right behind him. Jin Guangshan gave a sound of protest, but words seemed to have failed him, and no one paused. No one even looked back, though Zizhen was aching to, just to see the look on the man's face. The sound of the door shutting behind them was wonderfully, satisfyingly loud, and Zizhen was half sure his own heart had to be beating just as loudly.

*That, he thought, was awesome.*

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! I hope you enjoyed this chapter, it was a little tricky to write! Again, I hope to update in a couple of days, but we'll just have to see what I can do. Until next time, please take care!

# Chapter 21

## Chapter Notes

Hey everyone! Thank you so much for the lovely response to the last chapter - I love Zizhen so much, and I'm so glad you all enjoyed his point of view!

EDIT: embarrassingly, I forgot that Wei Wuxian flew with Sizhui earlier in this story - thank you so much to EarthGirl for pointing that out. I've now tweaked the chapter accordingly!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Jiang Cheng was convinced it would take a couple of hours, at least, before his heartrate went back to normal. The dizzying rush of adrenalin was making his head spin a little, and the mingling sensations of disbelief and relief were not helping.

He had stood up to the other clans. He had stood there, before Jin Guangshan and Nie Mingjue and the other clan leaders, and sworn to defend his brother. He'd done what he wanted to do for years, what he'd wanted to do all his life, and it hadn't blown up in his face – not yet. It had been a matter of seconds since they stormed out of the hall, after all, there was still time for Jin Guangshan to announce that the Jiang were his enemy, but he could hope that he'd done enough to keep them away from his brother for at least a few days.

But the pride he felt for finally standing up for Wei Wuxian turned to ash in his mouth. *He* hadn't won his brother anything. The plan hadn't been his, and Jin Zixuan, Lan Qiren and Zizhen had done all the talking. They were the reason his brother was safe – or safer, at least – not him. And earlier than that, when Lan Qiren had arrived at the Burial Mounds, Jiang Cheng had done nothing but stand there. Once again, Jiang Cheng was just going where he was pointed. It was a bitter failure, but not an unfamiliar one. After all, Jiang Cheng knew all about not being good enough.

He'd been not good enough his entire life.

He took a deep breath.

He would do better. He had to do better. Whatever happened, he had to protect his brother. Even if that meant protecting him from Jiang Cheng himself. Wei Wuxian couldn't die, not again. He couldn't. There were too many people that needed him.

Jiang Cheng knew that he was one of them.

Last night, when Wei Wuxian was snoring softly beside him, Jiang Cheng had thought of Jinling's words, his soft assurance that *he* didn't believe Jiang Cheng had killed his brother. Jiang Cheng wanted to agree, to believe that there was no way he could have, but the awful

truth was he wasn't sure. If A-Jie was dead and he didn't understand – the worst part was he could imagine himself striking, could imagine Sandu sinking into his brother's chest. He knew that he would have regretted it even before his strike was finished, that the second his brain caught up with his rage he would have wanted to take it all back – but he also knew that he was fast.

That maybe, he really had killed Wei Wuxian.

At that thought, Jiang Cheng had hidden his face in his brother's chest and cried until he felt empty. His sobs had been silent – Lan Wangji had been somewhere in the room after all, and he hadn't wanted to wake his brother, but of course Wei Wuxian had woken anyway.

And of course, he'd murmured softly to Jiang Cheng that it was okay, that it was going to be fine and he was going to make *sure* it would be fine, and he'd wrapped his arms around him tightly and run his fingers through Jiang Cheng's hair. It was like they were children again, and eventually, Jiang Cheng had drifted off to sleep, his brother's chest rising and falling beneath his cheek.

Wei Wuxian was alive, and he was going to stay that way.

"This will do," said Jin Zixuan, leading them into a meeting room, and Jiang Cheng blinked back into the present. Lan Qiren was speaking quietly to the other Lans, and they bowed, taking A-Yu with them as they left. Nie Mingjue paused at the doorway, looking down at Zizhen.

"Perhaps Wei-gongzi should wait outside," he said to Jiang Cheng.

"No," Jiang Cheng replied firmly, despite the small part of him that still quailed at the idea of speaking to Nie Mingjue 'firmly.' He reminded himself that they were both clan leaders, that they were equals, and continued. "Please be assured, Chifeng Zun – Zizhen can be trusted." Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed that Zizhen looked a little surprised at that, and he raised his eyebrows at him. "I told Wei Wuxian I'd look after you – you think I'd let you walk around Jinlintai on your own after the scene we just caused?"

Zizhen blushed slightly, giving a shy smile, and then he nodded, following Jiang Cheng inside.

"Zizhen also has more information," said Jin Zixuan, closing the door behind them and putting up a silencing talisman. Then, he paused, his eyes shifting to Lan Qiren. "Lan-laoshi, I... Just in case?"

Despite himself, Jiang Cheng grinned, especially as Zizhen went bright red. Clearly sensing a scandal, Nie Huaisang caught Jiang Cheng's eye.

"Later," Jiang Cheng mouthed, and Huaisang grinned, raising his eyebrows slightly as if to say he would hold Jiang Cheng to that. Then, Nie Huaisang turned his attention to Zizhen, his eyes resting, for just a moment, on Suibian. He blinked once, so naturally that Jiang Cheng wouldn't have noticed if he wasn't looking out for some sort of reaction. Huaisang's eyes met

Jiang Cheng's, but before Jiang Cheng could figure out whether that was his friend's 'questioning' gaze Huaisang looked away, and Nie Mingjue spoke.

"So, Wei Wuxian truthfully had nothing to do with Xichen's disappearance?"

"No," said Lan Qiren. "He did not. Not directly, at least."

Nie Mingjue frowned. "If the camps were truly in such terrible condition, why did Wei Wuxian not tell us? It was clearly a breach of Jin Guangshan's word..."

Jiang Cheng tried to think of something to say to that, a way to defend his brother, but once again someone else got there first.

"Da-ge," Huaisang said. "Did you and Xichen-ge ever tell Jiang-xiong about your agreement with Jin-zongzhu?"

"Of course," said Nie Mingjue, his frown deepening.

"Did you? Or did you just say that Jin-zongzhu was taking care of it?" Nie Huaisang pressed. "Because it sounds to me like Wei-xiong didn't think he had much of a choice. If no one told Jiang-xiong that the Wen were supposed to be kept alive, and supervised, who would tell Wei-xiong? He probably thought you all already knew. That you didn't care."

"Regrettably, that does seem to be the case," said Lan Qiren. "But there is something more you should know – something that *is* directly related to Xichen."

"Before we tell you, we must ask that you swear to silence," said Jin Zixuan. "If the story we tell here is repeated, the lives of those very dear to us will be at stake, and we cannot take that risk. I beg that you give your word you will never speak of what you hear in this room, unless one of us gives you express permission to."

Eyes shifting between Lan Qiren, Jiang Cheng, and Jin Zixuan, Nie Mingjue's frown deepened. He glanced at Huaisang, and raised his brow ever so slightly.

"I won't speak of it," Huaisang said, with an uncharacteristic seriousness. "If it's about Xichen-ge, if it will help find him – I swear, I won't tell a soul."

Jiang Cheng managed to send Huaisang a tight smile, but then his eyes flickered to Nie Mingjue, and he found himself holding his breath.

The debate as to whether or not to reveal the truth to one or both of the Nie brothers had been an intense one. Lan Wangji had argued most strongly for openness, claiming that not only was Nie Mingjue trustworthy, but he was also very likely to be involved in the search for Lan Xichen. As such, it was somewhat likely he would find out about the two Jin Guangyaos, one way or another, and it would be better to tell him ahead of time.

Wen Qing was the most vehemently opposed to this, and Wei Wuxian hadn't been far behind. Her argument had been that Nie Mingjue's hatred of the Wen ran deep, and that he already had a poor opinion of Wei Wuxian – even if he believed them, there was no guarantee he would be on their side. Wei Wuxian, meanwhile, claimed that too many people knew already

– thirty-three Lan elders was far too many, and with every additional person told, the likelihood of the secret leaking grew.

For their part, the four time-travellers had been insistent that Nie Huaisang, at least, should be told, and Jiang Cheng could understand that. Though it was still difficult to think of Huaisang as any sort of mastermind, he had given his life for Zizhen, after all. On that point, Wei Wuxian had added that Huaisang was smart enough to potentially help them come up with a plan to track down Zewu Jun and the Jin Guangyaos.

Yanli had quietly offered that she thought it unfair to put Nie Huaisang in a position to have to keep such a secret from his brother, and Lan Qiren had added an ‘especially as his brother is the clan leader.’ Jiang Cheng had wondered, a little grumpily, if either of his siblings had ever got the message to not keep secrets from clan leading siblings.

In the end, a stalemate had been achieved – they would tell Nie Mingjue, as long as he swore to silence.

After a long moment, Nie Mingjue nodded. “Very well. I swear. What is it?”

And so, they told him.

It was Zixuan who told most of the story, managing to somehow be both succinct and sympathetic. Jiang Cheng had expected Nie Mingjue to react similarly to how he’d reacted himself when he was told about the whole-time travel thing, but there was no visible anger on the older man’s face. Instead, he listened intently, his eyes moving to Lan Qiren anytime something particularly incredible was told. To Jiang Cheng’s surprise, Nie Mingjue didn’t seem surprised at all at the knowledge he had died five years from now, in the other future. Huaisang, on the other hand, did, and Jiang Cheng had to look away from the horror on his friend’s face. He’d felt that yesterday, still felt it every time he remembered that his sister and his brother had both died –

“Da-ge,” Huaisang choked, forgetting even to hide behind his fan. His face was white as ash. “Da-ge-”

“Hush, Huaisang,” Mingjue told him, but for all his face was stern, his voice was gentle. “Continue, Jin-gongzi.”

They told the shortened version of the story, but it still took about ten minutes, and by the end of it felt like Jiang Cheng’s stomach like was crawling with roaches. If Nie Mingjue turned around now and said he didn’t believe them...

Nie Mingjue took a deep breath and looked at Huaisang. Then, he looked at Lan Qiren. “And this is true?”

“I certainly believe so,” said Lan Qiren gravely. “Unfortunately.”

Nie Mingjue closed his eyes, his jaw clenching tightly. His hands curled into fists at his side, and still they trembled with rage, but something about his expression took Jiang Cheng back

a little. It wasn't just anger on the man's face – there was pain there, too, and a look of bitter defeat. Nie Mingjue shook his head slowly. "Huaisang..."

Nie Huaisang said nothing, but he grabbed his brother's arm, and Nie Mingjue opened his eyes.

"We will talk about it later," he said, his voice trembling. "About you – the ritual – later. Now.. Now we need to focus. We need to find Xichen. Now."

"But how?" Huaisang asked, in a voice that was strangely small. "Where do we even start to look?"

"We were hoping that you would be able to give us some insight into that, Nie-gongzi," said Lan Qiren, a little sharply. It was not how Jiang Cheng would have worded it, because it made Huaisang go even paler, his eyes widening.

"Me? But – but I don't know! I don't know anything! I thought –" Huaisang's voice broke, and he looked down at the ground. It looked almost like he was about to cry. "I thought Meng Yao was my friend. If he's doing *this*? I don't know..."

Nie Mingjue took a deep breath. "No, but you do know *him*."

"Do I?" Huaisang repeated faintly, his voice becoming a little louder and more desperate as he spoke. "Do I? Because don't you think if I did, I would have stopped him from swearing brotherhood with you and Xichen-ge? If I knew –"

"Huaisang," Nie Mingjue said firmly. "Calm down."

"Calm down?" Huaisang cried, shaking his head. "How do you expect me to calm down?! I've just heard that you – that you – that your murderer is running around somewhere and Xichen-ge is with him and doesn't know and he's doing god knows what and there's *two* of them and I thought he was my friend but he –"

"Huaisang!"

"I know," Jiang Cheng said, and Huaisang stared at him. Swallowing, Jiang Cheng met his friend's eyes, and let his fear and pain from the day before show on his face. "I know."

Huaisang's eyes widened, but then he blinked several times, and shrank back a little. He nodded, almost dazedly, and then took a deep breath. "What, what do you think I know? That could help?"

"Do you know where he might go?" suggested Jiang Cheng. "If he was in a panic?"

Huaisang pursed his lips, shaking his head slowly. "I know he wouldn't go anywhere he knows I know about."

Irritatingly, that made sense. "How about who he's close to? We know about Su She, but is there anyone else he'd go to?"

“I don’t think so,” Huaisang said, his face twisting in frustration. His fan tapped quickly against his palm. “I can’t even think of where to start... I did see them leave.”

“What?” Jiang Cheng and Jin Zixuan cried, and Huaisang nodded.

“It was around the same time you caused a commotion in the main hall,” he said. “I saw Jin Guangyao walking with Xichen-ge, and their heads were bowed low like they didn’t want to be overheard. They walked down towards the city. I’ve told Da-ge this, obviously. We’ve sent disciples all the way down to Lanling, but they couldn’t find anything. No one they spoke to remembered seeing them, or if they did, they didn’t remember which way they went.”

“He won’t still be in Lanling,” Nie Mingjue growled. “He’s too smart for that.”

“Do you think he’ll be working with himself? His younger self, I mean?” asked Zizhen.

Nie Mingjue closed his eyes again, pinching the bridge of his nose and probably despairing at the thought of two Jin Guangyaos again, and Huaisang shook his head. “I don’t think so. I don’t think he’d trust himself. Which means he’s probably kidnapped Meng Yao, too.”

“I care a lot less about that,” Nie Mingjue snarled. “And be careful where you say ‘kidnapped.’”

Realisation dawned in Huaisang’s eyes and he nodded, but Zizhen looked confused.

“Uh... why?” he asked hesitantly. “Isn’t that what’s happened?”

“Probably, but we can’t go around saying Xichen’s been kidnapped,” said Nie Mingjue. At the further confusion on Zizhen’s face, his expression softened slightly. “There are certain people who would use such a thing as a reason to disparage Xichen’s ability to run a sect.”

Zizhen’s eyes widened almost comically. “What? But everyone knows how powerful Zewu Jun is!”

“They do, but they also know how kind he is. How deeply he trusts. If it is known he has been kidnapped by Jin Guangyao, they will say he has poor judgement. That his compassion is a sign of a weak will.” Mingjue’s voice was thick with disgust, and Jiang Cheng watched Zizhen shrink back slightly, his face crumpling as he looked at the floor.

It hurt, a little, to see him figuring out what the others in the room already knew, to see a fraction of the boy’s innocence fall away. Though Zizhen was technically scarcely three years younger than him, it felt like the difference was greater. The time-travellers had lived through horrible things, but they hadn’t been forced to grow up by a war the way Jiang Cheng and his siblings had. Zizhen and the others were close to adulthood, true, but they were still kids. They should be allowed to be kids for as long as possible. Glumly, Jiang Cheng thought that might not be very long.

“That’s... that’s how people think? That’s... awful...” Zizhen trailed off, but then he scowled. “Politics is just – stupid. It’s stupid. Zewu Jun’s compassion is why everyone loves him so much – it shouldn’t be seen as a weakness, that’s just... horrible.”



Nie Mingjue gave a bitter smile. “Politics is stupid, and it is horrible. Unfortunately, it’s a little true – Xichen trusts Jin Guangyao, and right now that puts him in more danger.”

“Or less,” said Nie Huaisang quietly. “Even with... even knowing... I can’t imagine Jin Guangyao wanting to hurt Xichen-ge, and if we’re working on the theory that he wants Xichen-ge to trust him the way he did before, he’ll be doing as little as possible to raise suspicion. The longer Xichen-ge trusts him, the less threatened Jin Guangyao will feel. On that note, it’s possible that Xichen-ge doesn’t even know he’s been kidnapped, yet. Jin Guangyao is a good liar.”

Jiang Cheng considered that. While it didn’t seem likely to him, it also did seem possible. In all likelihood, all Jin Guangyao would have had to do to get Xichen away from Jinlintai would be to say, “Er-ge, shall we go for a walk?”

“Perhaps,” Nie Mingjue conceded gruffly, “though it won’t take long. Xichen would never abandon his clan. I imagine he might drop off the map if he thought Jin Guangyao’s life was at stake, but if he did, he would want to let his brother know. Xichen would never do anything to worry Wangji like that – when Jin Guangyao stops him, he’ll know something is wrong. Or he’ll at least try to get in touch with Wangji anyway.”

“Indeed,” said Lan Qiren gravely.

“He’d make a terrible spy,” said Huaisang, a fond, sad smile on his face.

“We’re getting off course,” grumbled Nie Mingjue, though his hand was on his brother’s arm again. “Where the fuck are we going to start looking?”

Even as he tried to think of an answer, Jiang Cheng took a second to enjoy the look on Lan Qiren’s face as he clearly fought the urge to correct Nie-zongzhu’s language. It looked like the older man was sucking on a lemon.

“While we’re here, we should retrace Zewu Jun’s steps ourselves,” Jiang Cheng suggested. It wasn’t much of a start, and he knew it, but he was tired of feeling useless. “I don’t doubt your disciples would have found anything obvious, but Chifeng Zun and Lan-xiansheng, you know Zewu Jun better than anyone, except perhaps Hanguang Jun.” He glanced at Huaisang. “And you know Jin Guangyao better than any of us, Nie-xiong. Now you know he’s involved, you might see something others would miss, especially without context.”

“It’s better than standing here with no idea where to start,” Huaisang admitted glumly, but then he perked up. “Oh!”

“What?” Jiang Cheng demanded, in accidental unison with the rest of the room.

Looking slightly breathless, Huaisang tapped his fan on the side of his hand excitedly, and Jiang Cheng bit down his frustration. He knew that Nie Huaisang looked like when he was trying to put his ideas into words, though the times that Jiang Cheng had seen such a look had led to wild (and often drunk) teenage escapades.

Eventually, Huaisang managed to get out, “No one saw them leave!” His tone suggested that that explained everything, and Jiang Cheng’s patience snapped.

“So?” he prompted, glaring, and Huaisang pointed his fan at him.

“So, that’s strange! Zewu Jun and Lianfang Zun aren’t exactly inconspicuous – it’s weird that no one noticed them leave. That means that Jin Guangyao either payed off the witnesses, or took Xichen-ge a route where they wouldn’t be seen.”

“Tunnels!” Zixuan said quickly, going a little pink the way he always did when people paid him attention. “There are tunnels, in and out of Jinlintai and Lanling. They were built by the second Jin-zongzhu, in case of an attack or a siege on the city. They –” He grimaced slightly his fist clenching around his sword. “They are only known to the direct bloodline.”

“Would Jin Guangshan have told Guangyao about them?” asked Mingjue immediately.

“I told him,” said Zixuan, wincing slightly. “I thought he ought to know.”

“That would also explain how he got Meng Yao out of Jinlintai,” Huaisang said, building on the momentum before Zixuan’s regret could bring it down.

“Let’s go,” said Mingjue, and he was out of the door before anyone could reply.

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Flying was nothing like he remembered it.

From the moment Jiang-shushu had given Wei Wuxian Suibian, he had loved to fly, loved the feeling on the wind on his face and the freedom of the air around him, and the dizzying sensation of how much space was between him and the ground.

But he'd only flown once since Wen Chao threw him into the Burial Mounds. Then, he had been behind Sizhui - there would be no physical way for the boy to throw him off the sword without also falling himself. Also, probably more importantly, his brain had been whirling with a million frantic thoughts, and adrenalin from the pass had been coursing through his veins, keeping his terror at bay.

Now, he was *exhausted*, drained empty by the destruction of the amulet.

That meant that there was nothing to distract him from the memories.

Nothing.

He gripped Lan Zhan’s arms tighter, a little worried about how deeply his fingers had to be digging into the other man’s forearms but unable to stop it all the same. Lan Zhan’s arms shifted around him, pulling him closer.

“Wei Ying?” he murmured, his voice close to Wei Wuxian’s ear, and he shuddered, leaning back against Lan Zhan’s chest.

“Just... just don’t drop me, Lan Zhan,” he said, his voice raspier than he would have liked. “Okay? Don’t – don’t let me fall.”

“Never,” Lan Zhan swore at once, pulling Wei Wuxian closer.

Wei Wuxian offered a small smile, but then he remembered that Lan Zhan was behind him, and couldn’t see it, and he let it fall away. He closed his eyes, but then he felt cruel hands grasping his shoulders instead of Lan Zhan’s arms around his chest, and he snapped them open again. He thought he managed to muffle his gasp, or that at the wind at least would snatch the sound away, but Lan Zhan knew.

“Wei Ying,” he said, pressing a kiss to Wei Wuxian’s hair. “I will never let you fall.”

“Okay,” Wei Wuxian whispered, and Lan Zhan gave a soft ‘Mn.’

And then, because Lan Zhan was undoubtedly the greatest person in the history of the universe, he began to hum. *Wangxian*, Wei Wuxian thought, the name filling him with a warmth and wonder that almost chased the terror away. Almost.

Bitterness roiled in his gut, filling the space where his golden core used to be. This should be amazing. He was flying with Lan Zhan, with Lan Zhan’s arms wrapped around him, with Lan Zhan singing to him – it should be the best thing in the world. Instead, his heart stopped beating every time he blinked, and his stomach kept swooping as though he was already falling, as though he’d been thrown down again. He could feel the hard hands of the Wen on his back, pushing him forward, could feel the swirling resentment below him, though they’d long since left Yiling behind. His breath hitched in his throat, and he could feel himself shaking, violently.

Lan Zhan stopped humming, and turned Bichen towards the ground.

“Lan Zhan!” Wei Wuxian protested, but it was more of a choke, and Lan Zhan swept down, landing in a field in the middle of nowhere. “The others, we have to get to the others!”

Wordlessly, Lan Zhan let go of him, moving his hands to Wei Wuxian’s shoulders to turn him around. Concern lined his face, and he put a hand on Wei Wuxian’s cheek. “Wei Ying.”

Wei Wuxian closed his eyes, the feeling of the ground beneath his feet holding the memory of falling at bay. “Lan Zhan. We, we need to go.”

“Look at me?” It wasn’t an order. If it was an order, perhaps he would have been able to disobey. But how could he refuse anything when Lan Zhan was asking, almost pleading?

Wei Wuxian opened his eyes, meeting Lan Zhan’s eyes.

“I will never drop Wei Ying. Never,” swore Lan Zhan, the intensity of his gaze impossible to deny. “If you fall, I will catch you. I will always catch Wei Ying. I promise.”

“Lan Zhan,” Wei Wuxian whispered, closing his eyes again. This time, Lan Zhan let him, and when Wei Wuxian let his forehead fall on to Lan Zhan’s chest, Lan Zhan folded his arms around him. “I’m sorry.”

“No need.”

“We’re going to be late,” Wei Wuxian pointed out half-heartedly, wrapping his arms around Lan Zhan’s waist.

“We gave no specific time for our arrival. We didn’t know how long we would take.” Lan Zhan paused. “We will wait until you are ready. Breathe, Wei Ying.”

“I’m ready now,” Wei Wuxian protested, but he didn’t really expect it to work. Obediently, he copied the rise and fall of Lan Zhan’s chest, feeling the deep, steady breaths slow his heart rate. The terror began to bleed out of him, but the anxiety remained, clamouring around in that space that had once held the most precious part of him. Swallowing, Wei Wuxian hooked his chin over Lan Zhan’s shoulder. “I had one. In their future.”

“One what?” asked Lan Zhan, a hesitance in his voice that hinted he knew exactly what.

“A golden core,” Wei Wuxian murmured, sinking his fingers into Lan Zhan’s hair. “Jinling said I looked like me, so, so I – I guess that when Mo Xuanyu did the Sacrifice Summon Spell, it replaced his body with mine, but... but because I didn’t *have* a golden core, his filled the empty space. Or maybe it anchored the ritual, and I, I got to keep it because of that. I don’t know. But I had to have one, because Sizhui has *his*. The life is the trade for the life, but a golden core had to be sacrificed to send back a core....” He froze, and Lan Zhan drew a sharp breath.

“Wei Ying?”

“Jin Guangyao!” Wei Wuxian gasped, pulling back to look at Lan Zhan’s face. “He won’t have a golden core! No one gave their core to the ritual for him, so he can’t cultivate!”

Lan Zhan’s eyes widened, and his lips parted. “Really?”

“Really,” Wei Wuxian nodded. “No one gave him their core, he just –”

*“Su, Su, Su She, he – when they, he – he k-killed Hanguang Jun, he cut, he – he cut –”*

“He used my blood to come back,” Lan Zhan said calmly, and Wei Wuxian nodded. “Wei Ying. Breathe.”

“Right,” Wei Wuxian choked. “Breathe. Breathe. That’s a thing I know how to do.”

“This is good,” insisted Lan Zhan. Determination glinted in his eyes. “He has a weakness – one he is not used to. We can use this. We must reach the others. We will fly like this.”

“Like – what?” Wei Wuxian spluttered, but Lan Zhan had already taken off again, his arms wrapped around Wei Wuxian even more snugly than before. “Lan Zhan! Is this not being shameless?”

“Do you feel safer?”

Wei Wuxian paused. He peeked down at the ground, already so far below them, and then he closed his eyes. “Yes.”

“Then it is not shameless,” said Lan Zhan.

A lump rose in Wei Wuxian’s throat, and he pressed his face into Lan Zhan’s shoulder. “I’m sorry.”

“No need.” Lan Zhan paused. “I love you.”

Wei Wuxian let out a breathless laugh. How, *how*, could he possibly be this lucky? “I love you too, Lan Zhan. So much.”

“Mn.” It was the happiest ‘Mn’ Wei Wuxian had ever heard, and he peeled his face away from Lan Zhan’s chest to press a kiss to his cheek. At once, Lan Zhan’s ears burnt red, and Wei Wuxian laughed again, moving his arms from around Lan Zhan’s waist to loop around his neck instead.

The terror couldn’t quite reach him there, not quite, and Wei Wuxian wondered if it was too soon to hope that maybe, things really were turning their way.

## Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed this chapter, please do let me know what you thought!

I'm afraid that updating every two days while I'm working was a little over-optimistic on my part, so from now on I'll do my best to stick to updating every third day. Hopefully I won't slip too much further than that! Until next time, please take care :)

## Chapter 22

### Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for all your support! Sorry that I'm a day late again, and thank you for your patience!

As a note on Chinese in this chapter, at one point Lan Zhan refers to Wen Qing as Wen-yisheng, meaning Doctor Wen. If this is for any reason inaccurate, please let me know.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

By the time Wei Wuxian and Lan Zhan caught up with the others, they had almost reached Lotus Pier. There were six boats, altogether, and Lan Zhan aimed for the first one. Jinling and Jingyi were standing at its front with Wen Ning, and as they landed Wei Wuxian could make out Yanli, Popo, Wen Qing, and Sizhui sitting inside.

Fortunately for Wei Wuxian, Jiang Cheng was currently in Jinlintai, which meant he was not there to yell at Wei Wuxian for flying facing Lan Zhan, with his arms around the other man's neck. However, Jinling was there.

"You look like a baby," he scoffed as Wei Wuxian removed his arms from around Lan Zhan's neck. "Do you have no shame?"

Lan Zhan frowned, but Wei Wuxian was still thrilled by the mini-Jiang Cheng that was his nephew, so he grinned widely, and said, "No." And then he kissed Lan Zhan so passionately it made Jinling gag.

"Wei Ying," Lan Zhan protested weakly as he pulled away, but he was saved by a miserable little voice that stole all of Wei Wuxian's attention.

"A-Die..."

At once, Wei Wuxian turned, so fast that he made himself a little dizzy. Sitting on the benches beneath the canopy of the boat were Wen Qing, Yanli, Sizhui, and Popo, and in Popo's lap was A-Yuan, who looked utterly stricken. Fear stabbed Wei Wuxian in the gut, and he lurched forward.

"A-Yuan, what's wrong?"

A-Yuan gave a little whine, holding out his arms pitifully, and Wei Wuxian scooped him up at once, holding him close.

"Where you attacked?" he asked, panic rising. "A-Yuan, are you hurt?"

“Sick,” A-Yuan sang sadly, and Wei Wuxian paused.

“He’ll be fine,” said a voice almost as miserable as A-Yuan’s, and he noticed that Sizhui looked just as green as his younger self. “At least now I know why I get boat-sick.”

“Sick!” A-Yuan mourned again, flopping his head against Wei Wuxian’s shoulder. “A-Die, make it better!”

“Oh, my poor little radishes,” Wei Wuxian said, kissing A-Yuan’s forehead and striding over to ruffle Sizhui’s hair. “Has Qing-jie not even given you anything to help?”

“No,” sighed A-Yuan sadly, and Wen Qing’s eyebrows rose.

“Oh? A-Yuan, did I not give you a piece of ginger candy, then?”

A-Yuan tapped his fingers on his lips as though he was thinking, his eyes far too wide to be truly innocent. “I just don’t remember that...”

“I think she did,” said Sizhui wryly.

“Perhaps another one will help more?” A-Yuan said hopefully, and Wei Wuxian snorted.

“Nice try.”

“Is it done?” Wen Qing cut sharply over any reply A-Yuan might have made, and Wei Wuxian nodded.

“It is,” he swore. He saw Yanli give a sigh of relief, pressing a kiss onto baby Rulan’s forehead, and he wished that he could be relieved, too. Instead, he felt empty, and cold, and afraid, but he pushed all of that down, because his son was in his arms and his son was seasick. That was infinitely more important.

“Wei Ying used much energy,” said Lan Zhan gravely, and Wei Wuxian looked up to see the other man casting a look at Wen Qing that was somehow both meaningful and beseeching. “The amulet cost him much.”

Wen Qing’s eyes narrowed, and she look at Wei Wuxian. Then, she nodded again. “I’ll take a look at him as soon as we get ashore, Lan-er-gongzi.”

“I am right here, you know,” Wei Wuxian protested, but Lan Zhan ignored him, too.

“Thank you, Wen-yisheng.”

Wei Wuxian pouted. “Shijie! They’re ignoring me!”

Jinling snorted. “How old are you?”

Wei Wuxian stuck out his tongue. “Xianxian is only three.”

“A-Yuan is three,” A-Yuan protested, frowning. “A-Die can’t be three, A-Yuan is three!”

“We’re nearly there,” said Yanli sweetly, rising to her feet gracefully. Wei Wuxian and Jinling shut up obediently, but A-Yuan still looked concerned.

“Li-gugu, A-Die’s not three?”

A-Yuan was looking to Shijie for comfort. Wei Wuxian’s heart was going to explode.

“No, darling,” said Yanli, reaching out to poke A-Yuan’s nose gently. “He’s just being silly. But sometimes he *acts* like he is three.”

A-Yuan smiled, looking at Wei Wuxian with an expression that was inexplicably adoring. “A-Die’s silly.”

Wei Wuxian gasped dramatically, clasping a hand to his chest. “A-Yuan! I’m never silly.”

“Yes, you are!” A-Yuan said, but just when Wei Wuxian was about to protest A-Yuan tucked his head under Wei Wuxian’s chin, snuggling close and winding his fingers clumsily through the man’s hair. “My A-Die is silly.”

“A-Xian,” Yanli said quietly, inclining her head towards the front of the boat. Reluctantly, Wei Wuxian considered giving A-Yuan back to Popo, just in case, but Rulan was still snoozing in the sling on his mother’s chest, and this was Lotus Pier. This had been home.

Steeling himself, Wei Wuxian tightened his grip on his son and made his way to the bow of the boat to stand beside Yanli. Lan Zhan followed him, a white shadow at his elbow. Wen Ning retreated inside.

And Lotus Pier grew closer.

His heart fluttered anxiously, but the sense of home filled his bones, steadying him a little. Jiang Jianyu was waiting for them on the pier, which made sense. One of Jiang-shushu’s cousins, Jianyu was one of the few cultivators of the Jiang bloodline left. Before Wei Wuxian had left he had been the second disciple. It made sense that now he was the first, and would be the one to greet them in Jiang Cheng’s absence. He had escaped the massacre at Lotus Pier purely by chance, having been out visiting the woman he’d been courting near Tangzhou. Plagued by a guilt that couldn’t feel much less than Wei Wuxian’s own, Jianyu had thrown himself into the war against the Wen, and Wei Wuxian had never heard him speak of his fiancée again. He didn’t know what had happened.

The last time he was here, he’d never been able to bring himself to ask.

As soon as they were in speaking distance, Wei Wuxian sent his brother’s second in command a cheeky grin. “Hi, Jianyu! Don’t worry, I have a letter from Jiang Cheng explaining, well-” He waved his hand out towards the plethora of boats behind him, his heart picking up speed in his chest. There was always a chance that Jianyu would refuse them, and he was frowning heavily.

Then, Jianyu spoke. “Da-shixiong, you’re late. Again.”



Wei Wuxian's eyes widened, and his heart stumbled. He wasn't – *Jianyu* would be Da-shixiong now, not him. Jiang Cheng had said that they still called him that and he hadn't thought that his brother was *lying*, exactly, but hadn't believed...

Jianyu's frown failed, falling into a little grin, and he bowed. "Welcome home, Da-Shijie, Da-shixiong."

Yanli smiled, inclining her head, and Wei Wuxian choked.

"A-Die?" A-Yuan murmured worriedly, and Wei Wuxian swallowed, blinking back tears quickly.

"I'm okay," he promised. "I'm okay."

Jianyu's eyes widened. "Wei Wuxian – you have a son?"

"Oh, yes!" said Wei Wuxian proudly, jogging A-Yuan on his hip. "This is A-Yuan. A-Yuan, this is Jiang Jianyu."

Jianyu made a noise like a spitting cat. "Yu-shushu," he corrected, and Wei Wuxian's heart soared.

A-Yuan nodded, a look of adorable concentration on his little face. "So many new shushus these days, A-Die," he said, and Jianyu grinned.

"And you're about to get a whole lot more," he promised, before turning to Lan Zhan, who was clearly the only other person on the boat he could see and recognise. "Hanguang Jun, welcome to Lotus Pier. Okay, Da-shixiong, show me that letter, then."

Stepping deftly out of the boat, Yanli passed over Jiang Cheng's letter, and Jiang Jianyu opened it carefully. His eyes widened slightly as he read, and then they narrowed. By the end of it he sighed, pinched the bridge of his nose, and closed his eyes.

"Right," he said. "Right. Okay. So, our Yu cousin?"

Yanli smiled, looking over her shoulder. "A-Ling?"

Jinling came to the front of the boat and bowed, smiling happily at the sight of Jiang Jianyu. A feeling swept through Wei Wuxian, and it took a moment for him to realise it was relief – if Jinling recognised Jianyu, that meant he was probably alive and well in the future.

"Yu Jinling," Jianyu greeted, bowing. "Welcome back to Lotus Pier. And the soon to be legitimised Lan twins?"

Wei Wuxian beckoned Sizhui and Jingyi forward, and they bowed and gave their names.

"Welcome to Lotus Pier," Jianyu repeated, bowing back. Then, his eyes flickered to Wen Qing, Wen Ning, and Popo. "Wen Ning-gongzi, Wen Qing-guniang, I presume?"

Wen Qing and Wen Ning stepped forward, and to Wei Wuxian's surprise, Jianyu bowed again. "Yunmeng Jiang thanks you for the help you gave to our clan leader during the war. We also thank you for taking care of our Da-shixiong. Welcome to Lotus Pier."

Wei Wuxian's mouth dropped open, and he looked quickly at the Wen siblings. Wen Ning looked absolutely flummoxed, though he was quick to thank Jianyu with a low bow of his own. Wen Qing's surprise was quieter, little more than a widening of her eyes, but it still took her a second to gather herself enough to bow.

Jianyu turned back to Wei Wuxian. "Right – let's get everyone ashore and settled. I'll grab some disciples to help. Hmm, what will be the quickest way to do that?" Suspicion crawled up Wei Wuxian's spine as Jianyu tapped exaggeratedly on his chin – and grew as his once (*still?*) shidi grinned. "A-Yuan xiao-gongzi," he said gently, "would you mind covering your ears for a moment? This might be a little loud." Jianyu mimed the action, and A-Yuan copied, his legs wrapping tightly around Wei Wuxian to compensate.

Then, Jianyu threw his head back, and hollered, "Da-shixiong's home!"

Wei Wuxian started to roll his eyes, but before he could a cacophony of voices shrieked out variations of "What?!" and "Really?" and "Finally!" The call passed from voice to voice, until all of Lotus Pier was ringing out with noise.

"Da-shixiong is home!"

"Wei-gongzi's back!"

"Wei Wuxian's here, he's here!"

Wei Wuxian laughed breathlessly as the sound of running footsteps grew louder, and what had to be half the population of Lotus Pier came thundering down the docks towards them. At the sight, A-Yuan gave a little whimper, locking his arms around Wei Wuxian's neck and clinging tightly.

"A-Die, A-Die-" Then he looked at Wei Wuxian's face and gasped, pressing his little hand to the tears on his father's cheeks. "A-Die!"

"It's okay, A-Yuan," Wei Wuxian promised, kissing his little hand. "It's okay, these are good tears. Good tears. These are my friends."

"Friends?" Jianyu cried indignantly, ignoring the first group of shidi and shimei who had reached the pier, and were already clamouring greetings. "We're not just friends, A-Yuan. We are your A-Die's – We are your clan. Your family."

"Jianyu," Wei Wuxian choked, and his shidi raised an eyebrow.

"Are you not Yunmeng Jiang, Da-shixiong?"

"I didn't think coming back would be so easy," he admitted weakly, and one of the first disciples to reach them snorted. It was little Huang Liuyang, who had grown about half a foot since Wei Wuxian last saw her, and now bore a spiritual sword on her belt.

“It’s not like any of us believed you’d *actually* left us,” she said, beaming.

A lump grew in Wei Wuxian’s throat, and he had nothing to say to that. He let the disciples greet him, and held A-Yuan steady, and tried very, very hard not to bawl.

“Have you brought us a new xiao-shidi?” asked one of the smallest shidis, one Wei Wuxian had never met before. He was on his tiptoes, looking up at A-Yuan curiously. “Hello!”

A pride unlike anything he had ever felt before swelled in Wei Wuxian’s heart, and he lifted A-Yuan up slightly on his hip. “This is my son, A-Yuan.”

The gathering disciples (a group that was somehow still growing as more and more people ran down the pier to greet them) let out a chorus of delighted gasps, and then a chorus of ‘welcome’s and ‘pleased to meet you’s and ‘hello, A-Yuan!’s. Their excitement was so palpable that A-Yuan eased his death grip a little, though he still leant close to Wei Wuxian. Automatically, Wei Wuxian raised a hand to stroke his son’s hair.

“Alright,” said Jianyu, and at once the disciples snapped to attention. In the span of a second they’d gone from an eager crowd to three straight lines, and even the smallest shimei, who couldn’t be more than two or three years older than A-Yuan, was standing with perfect posture. Wei Wuxian was so proud of Jiang Cheng and his clan that he could nearly burst. “This is Yu Jinling, Zongzhu’s cousin. He’s been with Yunmeng Jiang for about eight months now, since moving from Meishan. These are his friends, Sizhui and Jingyi, and you’ve met them before, too. The people in the other boats are from a small village in our territory that was recently destroyed by a terrible fire. They are, understandably, upset and a little anxious, so they’re going to be staying in the guest houses at Lotus Pier for the time being. Jiang-zongzhu wants to make sure that they are safe. I want you to help them all ashore, and help them settle into the guest houses. There’s about fifty of them, so two or three people per room should work.”

“Are any of them cultivators, Er-shixiong?” asked Li Qiang, his voice respectful but wary. He had lost an eye to the war with the Wen.

“A couple have practise healing cultivation in the past, yes,” said Jianyu. “None, however, are warriors, nor have they ever been.”

Li Qiang’s shoulders relaxed a fraction, and he inclined his head.

“I should have thought that was obvious, A-Qiang,” said his sister, Xiuying, a weary smile on her face. “They have come here with Da-shixiong, after all.”

A murmur of agreement ran over the disciples, a show of trust that Wei Wuxian had been so sure he would have lost forever.

“Da-shixiong would never bring anyone bad to Lotus Pier!” Huang Liuyang added with a nod.

“Why would warriors be bad if they’re from Yunmeng?” asked the littlest shidi, a frown on his face, and the girl beside him grabbed his sleeve, whispering in his ear. Wei Wuxian just

about caught the words ‘Da-shixiong’ and ‘Wen’ and ‘Burial Mounds,’ and the boy’s eyes widened.

“Oh!” He nodded somberly. “I understand, Er-shixiong.”

“Good,” said Jianyu, smiling fondly. “Oh, and if anyone asks you – there’s a disciple in our clan called Wei Zizhen, a cousin of Wei-gongzi, who’s been here all his life.”

The smallest shidi looked even more confused at that, and the shimei beside him elbowed him in the ribs.

“Hey – oh!” The child blinked up at Jianyu. “He’s been here all his life?” He gave a clumsy wink, and Wei Wuxian’s heart melted. Where was Jiang Cheng finding such adorable disciples?

“Exactly,” said Jianyu. “Right I’ll take care of the first boat – the rest of you, make sure our friends are settled in.”

“Understood,” said the disciples again.

“Come this way,” said Jianyu, gesturing to Wei Wuxian and the others on the first boat. “Jiang-zongzhu had more specific housing requirements for you.”

Wei Wuxian nodded, but then paused, glancing at Popo. Jianyu followed his gaze, and then nodded. “This is A-Yuan’s grandmother?” When Wei Wuxian nodded, Jianyu continued, “Then she should come with us too.”

They made their way through Lotus Pier, and hard as he tried, Wei Wuxian couldn’t keep the tears from his eyes – nor the smile from his lips. To his surprise, Jianyu led them nowhere near the guest houses, heading instead to the most inner part of Lotus Pier. He paused by a small building that stood roughly where Yu-furen’s rooms had once been, and held out his arm.

“Wen-Popo, Wen-guniang,” he said. Wei Wuxian froze, and Jianyu smiled, a little sadly. “Jiang-zongzhu thought it only fitting that the grandmother of his nephew should stay here.”

Wei Wuxian couldn’t help but choke, and A-Yuan’s grip tightened again. Officially, besides being in the innermost part of Lotus Pier, these rooms were now of no particular importance – both Yu-furen and Jiang-shushu’s rooms had been burnt to the ground by the Wen. When they rebuilt Lotus Pier, Jiang Cheng had moved the official residence of the clan leader and the clan leader’s wife to nearer where his own rooms had once been. He had never asked why, but Wei Wuxian suspected his brother had not wanted to take his father’s old rooms. He knew that Jiang Cheng’s worst nightmare would be to be trapped in a marriage that mirrored his parents – it was possible that his shifting of the rooms had something to do with that, too.

Now, these rooms had no set purpose, but Wei Wuxian knew it was no coincidence Jiang Cheng had picked them. Wen Qing glanced at him sharply, but he smiled and nodded. He would tell her later what this meant to him.

What Jiang Cheng knew this meant to him. He glanced at Yanli, worried for a moment that she might be upset, but a small, proud smile was on her lips, and though tears shone in her eyes, they didn't fall.

"Zongzhu would offer this room to Wen-gongzi," said Jianyu, gesturing to one close to Popo and Wen Qing's. "If he would like to remain close to his sister and grandmother."

Wen Ning's eyes widened, and he nodded. "Thank you – thank you."

Jianyu bowed low. "We will leave you to settle in."

But Lan Zhan stiffened, stepping a little closer to Wei Wuxian. "Wen-guniang..."

"Aiya, Lan Zhan, let everyone settle in, okay?" Wei Wuxian said, smiling wryly at him. "Wen Qing can come and see me then. I'm not in any pain, it's fine."

Jianyu's eyes narrowed slightly, and Wei Wuxian suspected that somewhere in Jiang Cheng's letter, there was mention of Wen Qing being a doctor. "As soon as you are all settled, I will return and fetch Wen-guniang to show her the way to your rooms, Da-shixiong, if she is willing. She can see to you then." Jianyu promised, because *apparently*, they were ganging up on him now. Turning back to Wen Qing, Jianyu bowed. "Please let us know of anything you need, either in terms of healing, comfort, or otherwise."

"Thank you," said Wen Qing, bowing low. As she rose, Wei Wuxian saw a flicker of worry in her eyes, but he smiled at her. Jianyu had let them in, had led them *here*. They were safe, now.

She went inside, and Jianyu led them on. They came to the rooms that had been Jiang-shushu's, next. Like Yu-furen's, they had been rebuilt differently after the burning, but it still brought a lump to Wei Wuxian's throat. Especially when Jianyu said, "Jiang-zongzhu offers to let Hanguang Jun stay here."

*Jiang Cheng*, Wei Wuxian thought, with a surge of love that hurt.

And then Jianyu made a blank face that did nothing to hide the mischief in his eyes. "He also says that under no circumstances are Wei Wuxian and Hanguang Jun allowed to be alone together here, nor in Wei Wuxian's rooms. He says that you are not married, and you, Da-shixiong, are not to be given the opportunity to bring shame upon yourself, Yunmeng Jiang, or Hanguang Jun."

Jingyi snorted, smothering his laughter with his sleeve, though Yanli did nothing to hide her giggles as Wei Wuxian scowled. "Well--"

"If you wish to argue, Da-shixiong, take it up with Jiang-zongzhu. Hanguang Jun, you're more than welcome to go and take some rest, but if you wish to see where Wei Wuxian and the twins will be staying you're more than welcome to come along," said Jianyu, utterly unfazed by Wei Wuxian's betrayed pout.

"Thank you," said Lan Zhan quietly. "The hospitality is welcome. I will not be staying long."

Wei Wuxian's heart clenched so suddenly at painfully that he flinched, looking around at Lan Zhan desperately. Lan Zhan's eyes widened, and then his brow furrowed slightly in regret.

"Xiongzhang," he said, and Wei Wuxian felt relief and guilt fight to chase his fear away.

Coming back to this, coming back *home* – he hadn't even thought about Lan Xichen. He reached out and squeezed Lan Zhan's hand.

Jianyu nodded gravely, inclining his head towards the letter in his hand. "I expected as much. Come, the sooner we're all settled, the sooner we can take action."

Yanli's rooms came up next, and Wei Wuxian was pleased to see they looked the same as ever, despite the fact she now lived in Jinlintai.

"Jiang-zongzhu said that Yu-gongzi might like to take the rooms beside Da-shijie's," said Jianyu, and Jinling's eyes widened almost comically. His mouth dropped open, but then he closed it with a snap and nodded. Wei Wuxian wondered if the room Jinling had been given was the one that he was used to.

"I'm going to get Rulan settled," said Yanli gently, "perhaps you will come to lend me a hand, A-Ling?"

"Okay," said Jinling, with an adorable eagerness that was more than a little heart-breaking, if Wei Wuxian stopped to think about it.

"A-Die?" A-Yuan asked quietly, and Wei Wuxian shook his head.

"Sorry, A-Yuan. I'm a little tired."

"Good thing we're nearly there, then," said Jianyu, looking at Sizhui and Jingyi. "For now, if it suits, Jiang-zongzhu has suggested that you two may like to stay with Da-shixiong in his rooms. Jingyi, you are also welcome to choose the spare bed in Hanguang Jun's rooms, should you prefer."

"Thank you, Jiang-gongzi," Sizhui said, Jingyi echoing the words at his side as they bowed. Jianyu returned the bow, and then looked at Wei Wuxian.

"I'll send for a smaller bed for A-Yuan," he said. "Then I will fetch Wen-guniang. I take it you know the way from here, Da-shixiong?"

Wei Wuxian nodded, but his throat suddenly felt very dry. His rooms – his rooms were where they'd always been... His feet moved of their own accord, leading Lan Zhan and Sizhui and Jingyi over wooden boards as familiar as the back of his own hands, and he swallowed.

Pushed open the door.

His bedroom was exactly how he had left it. There were a couple of loose bits of paper on the floor, a book thrown aside on the bed – a book that was *not at all* appropriate for A-Yuan, he realised with a start, snatching it up and tossing it under the bed instead. Jingyi snorted again,

and Wei Wuxian smiled wearily, sitting down on the edge of his bed with a soft sigh. A-Yuan shifted himself so that he was sitting in his lap, and Wei Wuxian kissed his hair.

“So,” he said, a lump his throat as he looked up at Lan Zhan, and Sizhui, and Jingyi. “This is my room.”

“Your room?” A-Yuan echoed in surprise, looking around.

“Yep,” said Wei Wuxian, smiling, “This is where I grew up.” Unlike many of the other buildings, Wei Wuxian’s rooms hadn’t suffered too much in the burning. Though they had been sacked, most of his possessions had little monetary value, so they’d been left behind. Even though he was the one that brought destruction down on their heads, his room had been left mostly intact. It was just another thing to feel guilty about.

“Wow,” A-Yuan whispered, his eyes widening. Then, he smiled, pointing at the childish carving of two men kissing at head of Wei Wuxian’s bed. “It’s A-Die and Rich-gege!”

Wei Wuxian laughed, grinning as Lan Zhan’s ears grew bright red. “I suppose it is. We’re going to be staying here for a while, now, A-Yuan.”

A-Yuan blinked, looking up at him. “Oh... When are we going home?”

Wei Wuxian didn’t pause. “We can’t go home. I broke the front door, I’m afraid.”

“What?”

“The front door, to my cave. It fell down, with a big crash,” said Wei Wuxian. “So, we’re just going to stay here.”

“Oh,” said A-Yuan, wide eyed. “Why did you do that, A-Die?”

“Eh, it was an accident,” said Wei Wuxian, and A-Yuan frowned at him, patting his wrist and doing a very good imitation of Wen Qing’s sternest voice.

“A-Die, be more careful!”

“I will,” Wei Wuxian promised, laughing. “But this is good, isn’t it? We’ll have a little bed here for A-Yuan, and there’s another bed in that room for Sizhui, and then Jingyi can have the daybed, if he likes. At least for now.”

“Okay,” said A-Yuan.

Unfortunately for Wei Wuxian, at that moment Jianyu reappeared with Wen Qing, who was still carrying her bag of medicine – and needles. Wei Wuxian scowled, and A-Yuan, recognising the expression, dutifully clambered out of his lap to give Wen Qing space, going instead to stand between Lan Zhan and Sizhui. He looked plaintively up at both of them, holding up with little hands, and with identical little smiles, Sizhui and Lan Zhan took a hold of his hands.

“Ah!” Wei Wuxian cried, clutching his heart. “Wen Qing – help – it’s too *much*!” He flopped back onto the bed for emphasis, but as usual, his dramatics did absolutely nothing to deter Wen Qing.

“Sit up,” she ordered, and Wei Wuxian obliged, grumbling. She poked him and prodded him and hit him on the back until he coughed up blood. Then she took his pulse, and pushed a hand against his forehead.

“His ears were bleeding,” said Lan Zhan softly, and then Wen Qing was grabbing his chin and looking at his ears, too, and Wei Wuxian rolled his eyes.

“I feel fine,” he said. “Exhausted, yes, maybe a little drained, but I’m not in any pain.”

He also felt empty and terrified and horrifically vulnerable, but no one else needed to know that.

“Hm,” Wen Qing said, her lips pursed tight. “There’s not as much damage to your body as I’d have expected. The amount of energy you’d have needed to use...”

“I used the Stygian Tiger Amulet’s own energy to destroy it,” Wei Wuxian explained. “Some of it had to channel through me, but I was able to throw it all back at the amulet.”

She nodded. “That... that makes sense. It also explains the exhaustion – it’s a wonder you were still on your feet.”

Something gold and glittering flickered in the corner of Wei Wuxian’s eye, and A-Yuan gave a gasp of delight.

“Butterfly! Butterfly, butterfly!”

The Jin messenger butterfly stopped in front of Lan Zhan, who closed his eyes. Wei Wuxian held his breath, and the others did too, leaving the room silent except for A-Yuan’s soft singing.

“Butterfly!”

Lan Zhan opened his eyes, looking at Wei Wuxian. “They have found tunnels. Beneath Lanling. Nie Mingjue and Nie Huaisang are with them – they are going to search the tunnels for evidence of Xiongzhang.”

“Thank god,” Wei Wuxian breathed.

“What for?” asked Jingyi faintly, his face twisted with worry.

“It’s a place to start looking,” said Wei Wuxian, standing up. “Let’s go.”

“Absolutely not,” said Wen Qing, tugging his wrist. At once, Wei Wuxian’s legs crumpled beneath him, and he would have landed on his back if she hadn’t also pulled him back onto the bed. “You need to rest, Wei Wuxian – I’m serious. In the morning, perhaps, you’ll have the strength to fly out, but you need to rest.”



“There’s no time!” Wei Wuxian protested. “And I don’t need to actually *do* anything while I fly, do I?”

Wen Qing stared him in the eyes, and went for the jugular. “If you use demonic cultivation again today, even a simple tune on Chenqing, you could die. You barely have enough energy left to stay on your feet – channel any more and you will pass out, and you’ll be lucky to wake up again.”

“A-Die,” A-Yuan whimpered, and Wei Wuxian glared at Wen Qing.

“Did you have to say that where he can hear us?”

Her jaw clenched. “He’s not the only one that loves you, Wei Wuxian, but he does seem to be the only one you’ll take care of yourself for. As your doctor, I’m ordering you to wait until at *least* tomorrow before you go to Jinlintai.” She paused, lowering her voice, though there was no doubt the Lans could still hear her. “As your friend, Wei Wuxian, I am begging you.”

Anger and frustration at his own pathetic weakness soared through him, but then an idea struck him, and he paused.

*That could work...*

“Okay,” he sighed. “Okay. I promise I won’t go to Lanling until tomorrow.” He looked up at Lan Zhan, smiling sadly. “I won’t ask you to wait, Lan Zhan. Sizhui and Jingyi can take me – we’ll set out first thing tomorrow and meet you there, and you’ll probably have already found Zewu Jun.”

“Wait, what?” Jingyi demanded. “Why are we being left behind?”

Wei Wuxian raised an eyebrow at him, lowering his voice. “You know full well I can’t fly there alone.”

“But-”

“It is an acceptable plan,” said Lan Zhan, though he looked like he would rather bite his own arm off than leave. “I – I am sorry I cannot wait.”

Wei Wuxian stood up, ignoring Wen Qing’s sigh, and took Lan Zhan’s hand. “He’s your brother,” he said seriously. “I would never ask you to.”

“I will go alone,” Lan Zhan said. “I am sure Jinling would appreciate the time with his mother.”

“What about your elders?” Wei Wuxian asked.

“Their orders were to protect the Wen, until Shufu gave further instruction,” said Lan Zhan, blinking at the offence on Wei Wuxian’s face. “I do not mean to suggest they need protection from Yunmeng Jiang, nor that Yunmeng Jiang are not strong enough to protect them. But if it is discovered that the Wen are here, the presence of the elders of Gusu Lan will be proof of our support.”

He had to admit, it made sense. Wei Wuxian nodded. “Okay. Are you – will you go now?” Lan Zhan nodded, and Wei Wuxian took a deep breath. “Okay. Okay. Be safe, alright?”

“I will,” Lan Zhan promised.

“I love you,” Wei Wuxian reminded him, and Lan Zhan nodded.

“I love you, too,” he said. “And you must be careful, too.” He paused, looking at Sizhui and Jingyi. “All of you.”

“We will,” Sizhui promised, and Lan Zhan squeezed his shoulder.

Then, he looked down. “Goodbye, A-Yuan. I will see you soon.”

Heartbreak appeared on A-Yuan’s face, and he let go of Sizhui’s hand to plaster himself to Lan Zhan’s leg. “Where are you going?”

Leaning down, Wei Wuxian extracted his son, who gave a whine of protest. “I’ll explain it to him. Go,” he murmured, kissing Lan Zhan quickly, and Lan Zhan nodded, leaving with a quick bow to Wen Qing. He was in the air almost before he was out of the door. A-Yuan gave a sad little cry, and Wei Wuxian pulled him close, sitting back down on the bed. “It’s okay, A-Yuan. Lan Zhan will be back soon – he has to go and help his brother.”

“His brother?” A-Yuan asked, wiping his nose on his sleeve, and Wei Wuxian nodded.

“Mm-hm. He’s a very nice man called Lan Xichen, and you should meet him soon. But he’s in just a little bit of trouble, so we need to go and help him. I’m going to go too, tomorrow, but it’s alright because I’ll be back, and when I’m back I’ll teach you how to swim like a little frog, and we’ll pick lotus seeds and eat all the soup we can, okay? In the meantime, Qing-jie and Popo and Li-gugu will all be here to look after you, and Ning-gege and Sishu too.”

“Hmm,” said A-Yuan, sticking out his bottom lip. He didn’t look too convinced, but he also didn’t look too afraid, either, so Wei Wuxian counted it as a win.

He tapped his nose like he was thinking, and then nodded. “Perhaps Popo might find it a bit strange here, with all this water. Would you go and tell her about all the fun things we’re going to do, so she’s not too scared?”

A-Yuan brightened at the idea, nodding. “Okay!”

“Take Qing-jie with you,” said Wei Wuxian seriously. “You can’t go outside without an adult until you learn how to swim – that’s important. Just like you couldn’t go near the wards, you can’t go outside without a grown up, okay?”

“Okay,” said A-Yuan. “I’ll tell Popo. We’re going to learn to swim like lotus seeds and eat frog soup!”

Wei Wuxian laughed. “Almost. I’ll see you later, okay, little radish?”

“Okay!” A-Yuan sang, kissing Wei Wuxian’s cheek, and Wei Wuxian hugged him until he squealed and laughed and squirmed to be let go.

Wen Qing rolled her eyes and took A-Yuan’s hand. “Rest,” she told Wei Wuxian sternly, and he raised three fingers to his head.

“I promise – no demonic cultivation or over exertion of any kind.”

“Good,” she said. “Come, A-Yuan, let’s go and see Popo.”

As soon as he was sure she was out of hearing range, Wei Wuxian gave Sizhui and Jingyi a grin.

“Right – we have a job to do.”

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading, I hope you enjoyed it! Please do let me know what you think, I love hearing from you.

One day, Wei Wuxian will get to read the whole of Jiang Cheng's letter to Jiang Jianyu. It will probably make him cry.

Until next time, please take care!

## Chapter 23

### Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for all your lovely comments, and all your support! I am actually on time for once, and I'm tentatively hopeful that updating every three days SHOULD be sustainable for me, at least for a while.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Wei-qian – Wei Wuxian, I’m not sure this is a good idea...”

“Ah, Sizhui, you worry too much,” Wei Wuxian said, grinning and pinching the boy’s cheek. “It’s fine. I’m not doing anything I promised Wen Qing or Lan Zhan that I wouldn’t do. We’re not taking any unnecessary risks, and we’ll be back with plenty of time before your bedtime.” Sizhui looked down, his face twisted with worry, and Wei Wuxian paused. “Sizhui, tell me – do you think I would knowingly lead you into danger? Real danger?”

“No, but...” Sizhui bit his lip, and Jingyi folded his arms across his chest.

“But you might do something stupid that would put your own life at risk,” he said. “Again.”

Wei Wuxian would have rolled his eyes, if it weren’t for the worry still clear on Sizhui’s face. “Not when I promised A-Yuan and A-Zhui that I’d be back, I wouldn’t.”

A small smile curled at Sizhui’s lips, though his brow remained furrowed with worry. “Can’t you take a nap first? Wen Qing said you should be resting.”

“I will rest,” Wei Wuxian promised. “And I’ll even go to bed at nine, like a little Lan. Just as soon as we get back.”

Sizhui sighed. Both he and Jingyi were wearing clothes from Wei Wuxian’s own wardrobe – robes that did not obviously tie them to any clan, and their headbands were wrapped around their wrists, hidden beneath their sleeves. Somehow, it made them look younger. In their hands, they held borrowed swords from the Jiang armoury that old Jiang Lifan had been all too happy to lend them, when he saw it was Wei Wuxian who was asking.

“You’ve been gone far too long, xiao-gongzi,” he had said, holding the swords at arm’s length. “You’re not running away again, now are you?”

“I will be back by nightfall, I promise,” Wei Wuxian had sworn, and the old man had given him a wrinkly grin – and the two swords.

“Right,” Wei Wuxian said now, clapping his hands together. “The sooner we leave, the sooner we get back. Sizhui, I’m going to fly behind you, and unfortunately, I’m going to

probably hold on far too tight to be comfortable, but I want you both to ignore that, if you don't mind. Let's go."

Sizhui sighed, but nodded, and Jingyi did a poor job of hiding his enthusiasm behind a sombre frown. They mounted their swords, and Wei Wuxian took a deep breath. As long as he was behind Sizhui, where he couldn't even theoretically be pushed off, he would be fine.

He hoped.

As if sensing his nervousness, Sizhui hesitated, and Wei Wuxian scoffed, wrapping his arms around Sizhui and resting his chin on the boy's shoulder. "Come on, let's go, before Wen Qing catches us and shoots us full of needles."

"So, we are doing something, wrong," Sizhui said glumly, though he did take off. Trying to ignore the swoop of his stomach as the ground disappeared from beneath him, Wei Wuxian shook his head.

"Ah, Sizhui, you listen to me – it's always better to ask forgiveness than permission."

"I'm sure that's never backfired on you at all," said Jingyi, smirking.

Wei Wuxian laughed, trying to ignore how his heart was already starting to race. "Eh, it works most of the time."

"I still think we should have told someone where we're going," Sizhui said, glancing over his shoulder.

"We left a note," Wei Wuxian reminded him.

"Mn," Sizhui said, sounding so much like Lan Zhan that Wei Wuxian's heart swelled, chasing away the fear for a second. It was just a second, and when it ended he found that he had to work hard to keep his breathing even, but it was doable. Sizhui was here, and nervous, and if he knew that Wei Wuxian was afraid, then it was likely he would be afraid too.

Wei Wuxian never wanted Sizhui to be afraid again. It was an impossible hope, and he knew it, but he wished it all the same, hugging the boy closer. He felt a little of the tension in Sizhui's shoulders ease, and he smiled.

They flew in comfortable silence for a while, though Wei Wuxian noticed that both Jingyi and Sizhui were travelling very fast, speeding. The faster they flew, the faster Wei Wuxian's heart pounded against his rib cage, but every time the panic clawed up his throat he forced himself to think of the fear on Sizhui's face at Qiongqi Pass, and during the story, and how desperately he never wanted to see that again. It was enough – just enough – to allow him to get control over himself, though he found himself squeezing his son tighter and tighter.

Neither boy seemed to tire, no matter how far they travelled, and to Wei Wuxian's slight surprise they reached the small village in just over an hour. His knees went weak with relief as his feet hit solid ground, and Wei Wuxian did his best not to stumble, instead peering up at the manor in front of him. It was not unimpressive, for a clan of non-cultivators, but

something about it made his stomach curl. There was a sense of unease crawling over his skin, and the hair on his arms was rising.

“Xian-gege?” Sizhui asked quietly, and Wei Wuxian shook his head.

“I think it’s fine,” he said slowly. It didn’t feel like resentful energy – maybe it was just a bad hunch. “Come on – this is the place?”

Jingyi nodded. “Mo Manor.”

They knocked on the door. After a few moments, a servant answered, her eyes widening at the sight of three cultivators at the door.

“Hello,” Wei Wuxian said, giving a friendly smile. “We are here to see Mo-er-guniang. Is she free?”

“I shall ask Mo-furen, Gongzi,” said the servant with a bow, looking hesitantly at them.

“Wonderful,” said Wei Wuxian. “We’ll wait here.”

A few minutes later, the servant reappeared, two women before her. The first wore rich clothing and a simpering smile, but the second’s robes were simple, and she wore little jewellery. She was pretty, very pretty, but she also looked young. Very young.

“Cultivators,” said the first woman, bowing. “I am Mo-furen. What has brought you to our humble home?”

Wei Wuxian glanced at Sizhui, who gave a small nod. So this was the same Mo-furen who had presided over the house when the Blade Spirit attacked. The same Mo-furen who had abused Mo Xuanyu until he was willing to destroy his very soul for revenge.

The one who may well already be abusing Mo Xuanyu now.

“I am here to speak to Mo-er-guniang,” said Wei Wuxian, smiling gently at the younger woman. “Is that you? May I ask your name?”

“I am, gongzi,” she said quietly, bowing. She met his eyes, but only for a second. “My name is Mo Nianzhen.”

“It is lovely to meet you,” said Wei Wuxian again, angling his body towards her in a way to make it clear who he was addressing. “Mo-er-guniang, my name is Jiang Jianyu, of Yunmeng Jiang. My people have been investigating the crimes and misconduct of Jin Guangshan-zongzhu, and my clan leader was most grieved to learn of his treatment of you.”

Mo Nianzhen’s eyes widened in surprise, and her cheeks flared red. She said nothing, though her eyes flickered almost fearfully towards Mo-furen.

“Jiang-gongzi,” Mo-furen said, “there is no need. I assure you, the Mo family has greater honour than the actions of my sister might suggest.”

“I wasn’t talking to you,” said Wei Wuxian, letting his voice be sharp for a moment. Both women flinched, and he softened his tone. “Mo-er-guniang, we are here to offer you residence in Yunmeng – your son is old enough to begin training as a cultivator, if he chooses, and I can assure you that he is unlikely to receive any training or attention from his father unless Jin Guangshan can see a way to use him. We would see you and your son safe, and cared for.”

Mo Nianzhen drew in a sharp breath, her eyes widening again. “You – you wish to teach Xuanyu how to cultivate?”

“If he wants to learn,” said Wei Wuxian, nodding. “If he does not, our offer of refuge still stands.”

“Refuge?” cried Mo-furen. “And just what do you deem a threat to my sister that she would need to take refuge from?”

Wei Wuxian turned to Mo-furen, his eyes darkening. “Would you like me to repeat the rumours I have heard, regarding the treatment your sister and nephew have received at your hands? Because I will – I will repeat them here and now, and I will repeat them in every town and every village between Yunmeng and Gusu, if you refuse to let Mo-er-guniang leave.” He paused, turning back to the younger woman with a smile. “It is, of course, your own choice. But Yunmeng Jiang would see you protected. We would see you and Xuanyu safe. Will you come with us?”

Mo Nianzhen looked at her sister, who looked utterly furious, and then her jaw tightened.

“I would be honoured, Jiang-gongzi,” she said, bowing low.

“Fantastic! I’m afraid we’re on rather a tight schedule – if you don’t mind, Mo-er-guniang, we would appreciate if you fetch your son and your most important belongings, so we might depart immediately. We’ll send a cart for the rest of your things within the week.”

“That will not be necessary, Jiang-gongzi, but thank you,” she said. “I can gather my things in but a minute, I-” She cut off, blushing slightly, and Wei Wuxian could read between the lines.

“Whatever you do not have or forget to bring will be gladly provided by Yunmeng Jiang,” he promised. With a final, wary glance at her sister, Mo Nianzhen bowed again and hurried away down the hall.

For a moment, Mo-furen seemed to struggle for words, but unfortunately, her speechlessness didn’t last long. “Jiang-gongzi, I do not know what it is you have heard, but I assure you the Mo family have never ‘abused’ my sister or her son. To spread baseless rumours of misconduct... I doubt your clan leader would wish to hear of such behaviour.”

At his right shoulder, Jingyi bristled, but Wei Wuxian just laughed. “Oh, Mo-furen, I assure you that he wouldn’t care. But as long as you leave Xuanyu and your sister alone, I will hold my tongue. For their sake. Not yours.”

At that moment, Mo Nianzhen reappeared, red cheeked and a little dishevelled, with a bag slung over her shoulder and a boy clinging to her hand.

Wei Wuxian's smile died on his face. Jinling had said that Mo Xuanyu was eight or nine, but he was tiny, barely taller than a six-year-old, and there was not a single trace of baby fat about him.

Worse, there was a dark, mottled bruise beneath his right eye, and the dusty remains of a large shoe print on his trousers.

Fury churned within him, and he found himself reaching for Chenqing – but instead finding Sizhui's hand. He blinked. Of course – Sizhui had made him leave Chenqing behind.

“Gege,” he whispered, and Wei Wuxian nodded, forcing himself to smile.

He had promised, after all.

He crouched down in front of Mo Xuanyu, smiling gently. “Hello, Xuanyu. How old are you?”

Looking hesitantly up at his mother, the boy whispered, “Nine, gongzi.”

Nine. So he was small for his age, then.

“Very grown up,” said Wei Wuxian. “Well, it's good to meet you, Xuanyu. This is Sizhui and Jingyi, and all three of us are cultivators. If you like, you can learn, too. Would you like that?”

After another glance at his mother, Mo Xuanyu nodded carefully, a tiny smile tugging at his lip.

“Good. Well, Mo-er-guniang, I can take your bag, and you and Xuanyu can ride with Jingyi. As I said we're in a bit of a rush, but don't worry – sword flying is perfectly safe, and no one will let you fall. Okay?”

The mother and son nodded hesitantly, and after a stilted, very formal goodbye to Mo-furen, they were off. Wei Wuxian felt buoyed by the success. He hadn't been entirely sure what he was going to do if Mo-er-guniang had not wanted to come, but it didn't matter, because that hadn't happened. She did look utterly terrified as Jingyi took off, clutching to the back of his robes with white hands, Xuanyu sandwiched between them. The boy, however, looked more excited than afraid, an expression that grew stronger the further behind Mo Village fell.

It was the right thing to do, and he knew it. This Mo Xuanyu would never be beaten and abused and neglected to the point of despair. Not on Wei Wuxian's watch.

When they had been flying for a while, Mo Xuanyu spoke a little hesitantly. “Jingyi-gongzi, how does the sword fly?”

At once, Jingyi launched into an eager explanation of the theory, until Xuanyu asked another question, and then another, growing less hesitant by the second. Something in his mother's



face seemed to soften at that, though she was still grimacing, her eyes tightly closed.

By the time they reached Lotus Pier, Jingyi had been able to coax a couple of giggles out of Xuanyu – and had looked adorably proud of himself for doing so – and Wei Wuxian was starting to understand why Wen Qing had been so eager for him to rest. The exhaustion was hollowing out his bones and slumping his shoulders, and as they came down to land he let out a yawn.

“We’re here,” he said, unable to keep from squeezing Sizhui for a moment before releasing him. “Now, hopefully no one had noticed that we’re gone...” He turned to the mother and son. “There’s just one more thing I should tell you – please don’t panic. Everything else I told you is the truth, but my name isn’t Jiang Jianyu. My name is -”

“Wei Wuxian!” Wen Qing’s voice yelled across the pier, and Wei Wuxian winced.

“Uh, that.”

Mo Nianzhen gasped, flinching back and clinging Mo Xuanyu to her, and Wei Wuxian’s wince deepened.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I didn’t tell you because I didn’t want you to worry, or to think I was kidnapping you both. I’m aware I have a bit of a reputation. But I promise – everything I told you apart from my name is the truth.”

“Wei Wuxian, don’t you dare ignore me!”

Wei Wuxian turned, giving Wen Qing his brightest smile. Yanli was at her shoulder, a look of sadness on her face that he carefully looked away from, and Jianyu was standing beside her with a face like thunder. “Hello, Qing-jie-”

“Don’t even think about it,” she warned.

“A-Xian,” said Yanli softly, in her ‘you scared me’ voice, and guilt hit Wei Wuxian in the gut. “Why on earth did you do that?”

“You don’t just get to disappear, Da-shixiong,” Jianyu said with a scowl.

“I didn’t! I left a note! And it was important, this is-”

“You left a note on your door saying you were napping, and a second note on your bed saying, and I quote ‘Okay so maybe not napping but I’ll be back by dinner, I promise.’” recited Wen Qing.

“With a smiley face,” added Jianyu, shaking his head.

Wen Qing scowled. “You were supposed to be resting! What on earth could be so important?”

“I didn’t break any promises!” Wei Wuxian protested. “I didn’t do anything except ride on the back of Sizhui’s sword and do some talking. But it is important. This is Mo-er-guniang,

Mo Nianzhen, and her son, Mo Xuanyu. Jianyu, if you could find somewhere for them to stay, I would appreciate it. They would like to join Yunmeng Jiang.”

“Oh,” said Yanli, her eyes widening, and Wen Qing’s lips pursed in the way that meant Wei Wuxian was at least partly right, but she was still angry.

Jiang Jianyu, on the other hand, did not understand at all, and he pinched the bridge of his nose. “Da-shixiong, could you not have waited a day? We’re trying to fit an entire dislocated village into Lotus Pier, and you want to bring in more people?”

“We, we do not wish to be an inconvenience,” Mo Nianzhen whispered, and Wei Wuxian turned to reassure her, but Yanli got there first.

“You are not an inconvenience,” she promised, stepping forward. “Jiang Jianyu is merely a little busy today. I’m afraid it may take us longer than usual to find you suitable rooms.” She paused, leaning down to meet Mo Xuanyu’s eye in a way that somehow didn’t seem she was looking down on him. “My name is Jiang Yanli,” she said. “And I am your sister-in-law.”

Mo Xuanyu’s eyes widened, and his mother stiffened, fear on her face. “You are?”

“Mm hm,” said Yanli, smiling sweetly. “My husband is Jin Zixuan, your older brother. He will be pleased to meet you, when he gets back.” She paused. “I know your father can be a little... Well, he is not a particularly nice man, and he hasn’t taken very good care of you, or your A-Niang. But we will, I promise. May I call you Xuanyu?”

The boy nodded, a hesitant smile on his face. Wei Wuxian grinned proudly. It was impossible for any child to be afraid of Yanli. She stood up, and turning her smile to Mo Nianzhen.

“Welcome to Lotus Pier,” she said. “It is lovely to meet you both. Please, call me Yanli,” Shijie said, smiling so warmly that Mo Nianzhen smiled back. “I hope you will both be very at home, here.”

Jianyu cleared his throat, and then bowed. “I am afraid that it may take us some time to find appropriate lodgings for you today, Mo-er-guniang, but we will do so as swiftly as we can.”

“Thank you,” she murmured.

Wei Wuxian was just about to pat himself on the back for a job well done when Shijie’s face fell, and she turned to face him with a look of utter sorrow on her face.

“A-Xian, why would you not tell us where you were going? You needn’t have gone today – we could have sent out disciples to fetch Mo-er-guniang and Xuanyu. You’re not on your own anymore, A-Xian, there’s no need to do such reckless things.”

“Ah, Shijie, it wasn’t *reckless*,” he began, but Wen Qing leapt onto the bandwagon.

“It doesn’t matter – either way you should have told us! You have a terrible track record for going off on your own and getting into trouble – what were we supposed to think?”

“I wasn’t alone-”

“I don’t care. You weren’t where you said you were, and you weren’t resting.”

“I had to do something!” Wei Wuxian protested. “I couldn’t just sit around waiting while everyone else is busy looking for Zewu Jun and sticking it to Jin Guangshan.”

“You just destroyed the Stygian Tiger Amulet!” Wen Qing retorted. “That is something!”

Wei Wuxian clenched his jaw, looking away. Jingyi leant towards him.

“Hey, is this one of the times asking for forgiveness works better for you?”

Despite his best efforts, it was impossible to fully hide his smile as he waved his finger at the teenager. “So help me, Lan Jingyi, I will throw you into the lake.”

“You will not,” said Wen Qing sharply. “That would be over exertion. We need – ah, excellent.”

Wei Wuxian followed her gaze up the pier, a jolt of alarm shooting into his heart at the sight of A-Yuan trotting towards them, his hand in Wen Ning’s.

“You didn’t tell him-”

“That his father up and left without saying goodbye? No, we didn’t, but I am never going to forgive you for making me think I might have to,” said Wen Qing. A-Yuan’s eyes widened when he saw Wei Wuxian, and he gave a little frown.

“A-Die! Qing-jiejie said you are supposed to be sleeping! That you are very tired and need a nap!” With these last words, A-Yuan threw himself across to attach himself to Wei Wuxian’s legs, and if he had had the willpower to tear his eyes away from his son’s adorable face, Wei Wuxian might have seen Mo Nianzhen’s relax slightly as the myth of the Yiling Patriarch dissolved before her.

Wen Qing turned to Jingyi and Sizhui, and Wei Wuxian frowned.

“Ah, Wen Qing, don’t yell at them. They did nothing wrong. I made them go.”

Wen Qing stared at him as though he had just told her two and two made seven. “I know that. I was going to say that A-Ning will take them to go and get something to eat.”

“Oh...” said Wei Wuxian, and A-Yuan rocked back on his leg.

“A-Die, are you very tired? Qing-jiejie said you were very tired.”

“I am a bit tired,” Wei Wuxian admitted, and A-Yuan smiled at him.

“Come for a nap, then, A-Die,” he said, and then he took Wei Wuxian’s hand and promptly began to walk towards Wei Wuxian’s rooms. He hadn’t even acknowledged the Mos, which was really rather rude of him, and Wei Wuxian tossed an apology over his shoulder.

“He’s not used to meeting so many new people. But it’s nice to meet you – make yourselves at home!”

Wen Qing followed Wei Wuxian, jabbing him in the ribs, but he heard Yanli speaking gently to the Mos.

“A-Xian is... enthusiastic. Come – while Jianyu is finding you somewhere to stay, would you like to meet your nephew, Xuanyu? His name is Rulan.”

Wei Wuxian smiled.

“Stop it,” Wen Qing muttered. “You are in trouble forever. I thought you’d done something awful.”

“I wouldn’t,” Wei Wuxian said, holding up his hand as Wen Qing glared at him. “I know I would’ve, once, but not now. There’s too much to lose.” He let his gaze move down to A-Yuan, who was leading him through Lotus Pier as though he had known it all his life.

Wen Qing sighed. “We have all been through a lot, Wei Wuxian. You cannot blame us for being afraid.”

Wei Wuxian wilted slightly. “I’m sorry. I didn’t want to scare you.”

“Then talk to us. And sleep. Sleep first. You should have eaten, too. Jiang Yanli only opened your door because she wanted to bring you soup.”

“There’s soup?”

“There was soup. A-Yuan enjoyed it.”

“It was very nice. A-Yuan left some for A-Die,” said A-Yuan loyally, and Wei Wuxian smiled slightly.

Feeling a little guilty for scaring her, Wei Wuxian let Wen Qing poke and prod him again, waiting patiently until she was satisfied that he hadn’t hurt himself. Then, and only then, did she hand him a bowl of cold soup.

“It was hot two hours ago,” she said. “You wouldn’t be getting any at all if you didn’t need it.”

“Shijie would warm it up for me,” Wei Wuxian muttered, pouting, and Wen Qing raised her eyebrows.

“No doubt she would. Jiang Yanli is a much more forgiving Jiejie than I am.”

Wei Wuxian’s heart skipped a beat, and he looked up at her. She smiled slightly, and then shook her head.

“Eat your soup. If you want it warm you shouldn’t have run off.”

“A-Die needs to nap,” A-Yuan added, patting Wei Wuxian’s arm, though his eyes also flickered towards the soup. Wei Wuxian gave him a spoonful, and then two, but Wen Qing spoke up before A-Yuan could take a third.

“Your A-Die needs the soup to feel better, A-Yuan,” she said, and his little eyes widened.

“Okay,” he said, pushing Wei Wuxian’s hand towards his mouth. “For A-Die. You can feel better.”

The exhaustion struck him harder than ever, now that there was food in his stomach, and he yawned. Wen Qing took the bowl from his hands, and A-Yuan stood up on the bed, tugging at Wei Wuxian’s shoulder.

“It’s time for a nap, now, A-Die,” he said gently, giving a satisfied smile as Wei Wuxian lay down. “Then you can feel better, okay?”

“And don’t you dare get up again,” said Wen Qing tightly. A-Yuan looked at her, and then back at Wei Wuxian. Then, snuggled up to Wei Wuxian’s chest, wrapping one little arm around his father.

“A-Die can stay for a nap with A-Yuan,” he said softly. “A-Yuan can help A-Die nap. Shh now, A-Die. Time for sleep.”

Smiling, Wei Wuxian closed his eyes. Exhaustion dragged him down before Wen Qing even left the room.

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It was safe to say that Nie Huaisang was, to be frank, freaking out.

He’d known it was going to be a terrible day as soon as he woke up – Da-ge had insisted that he come to the war meeting to discuss the attack on the Burial Mounds, despite the fact that Huaisang really didn’t want to go, and that he wouldn’t exactly be any use if he did. He had told Da-ge, more than once, that he thought Mianmian and Lan Wangji were right – that Wei Wuxian wouldn’t just kill guards indiscriminately, and that he really didn’t think his friend was so evil he would kidnap a child, but Nie Mingjue hadn’t listened. He’d just spoken darkly about the Stygian Tiger Amulet, and warned Huaisang that resentful energy could make monsters out of men.

Of course, Huaisang hadn’t really known all that much about what Wei-xiong was doing, either. He couldn’t provide proof or details, because he didn’t have any. He didn’t understand, and once or twice he had considered going to the Burial Mounds to see for himself. Just once, he had made it as far as Yiling, but at the edge of the Burial Mounds he had seen the curl of resentful energy, and the red eyes of a ghost, and he’d run halfway back to Qinghe.

Now, though, the clans had decided that Wei Wuxian had done enough. That he had kidnapped Jin Zixuan (which made no sense, because Wei-xiong hated Jin Zixuan and would *not* want to voluntarily spend time with him) Jiang Yanli (which also made no sense, because Wei-xiong quite clearly loved his sister more than anything in the world, and she clearly felt the same – surely if she was with him, she went willingly?) Jin Rulan (did it count as

kidnapping really if he was with his parents?) Jiang Cheng (frankly, Huaisang could see Wei-xiong kidnapping his brother just for the fun of it, but now didn't really seem like the time) Lan Yu (who?) Jin Guangyao (who he didn't think Wei Wuxian had ever even had a conversation with) and Lan Xichen (and really, if Wei Wuxian was going to run away with a Lan, it was definitely going to be Lan Wangji.)

Jin Guangshan had decided Wei Wuxian was guilty. That they had to storm the Burial Mounds, to purge his evil from the world. And Huaisang was sure that that wasn't *right*, that it couldn't be the whole story, but nobody ever listened to Huaisang – except, ironically, Wei Wuxian, Lan Xichen, and Jin Guangyao. He didn't see the point in going to the meeting. Not when he could offer nothing, and he would have to sit there and listen to the leaders of the cultivation world plan the murder of the best friend he had ever had.

In the end, he had gone mainly out of concern for Jin Guangyao and Lan Xichen. If Jiang Yanli and her baby were with Wei Wuxian, Huaisang saw no reason to fear for them, but it didn't make sense for Da-ge's sworn brothers to have vanished too – especially as he was so sure he had seen them leave Jinlintai *before* Jin Zixuan had flown away. The war council had been just as awful as he had expected – until Jin Zixuan's grand entrance.

That, in Huaisang's humble opinion, had been fantastic, and his spirits had risen significantly as Jin Zixuan, Jiang-xiong, and *Lan Qiren*, of all people, had laid into Jin Guangshan like there was no tomorrow. Suddenly, it had turned from a horrible day to a fantastic one – Jin Zixuan was being shamed, and Jin Guangshan proved a liar, and Wei-xiong's life was no longer free for the taking. It was even looking like he might have been *completely justified*, which meant that there was a chance that this would finally all be over. Lan Qiren – *Lan Qiren* – was saying that Wei Wuxian was in the right, and really that meant it was just a matter of time until he was pardoned, or even exonerated.

Then, they got to flounce out of the war meeting. Huaisang was sure Da-ge would have used a different word, but actually being able to turn his back on Jin Guangshan with a demure little flick of his fan was the highlight of his year. The day couldn't get any better.

It had got worse.

So, so much worse.

At first, Huaisang had thought Jin Zixuan had to be pulling some sort of twisted joke, but Lan Qiren was nodding like it was the truth, and there was bitterness and sadness and anger in Jiang Cheng's eyes that looked real, and the horrible story had spilled out before them.

Suddenly, it had been the worst day of Huaisang's life.

Jin Guangyao, Jin Guangyao who was his friend, who he trusted, who –

He had killed Da-ge.

Betrayal was bitter iron in his mouth, and it felt like a demon had its clawed hand in his chest, crushing his heart until it burst within its grip. The most terrifying part was that Da-ge hadn't looked surprised. When Jin Zixuan said he had died in five years' time, just five years,

Nie Mingjue had looked resigned, like he expected it, and Huaisang had very nearly screamed. Why would he expect it? He couldn't – Da-ge couldn't die. He couldn't leave Huaisang alone, he couldn't, he wouldn't – but he hadn't looked surprised or angry until Jin Zixuan said that Jin Guangyao had been involved.

Even now, Da-ge was expecting to die.

Huaisang had asked, once, if there was a reason that their father had died before he reached the age of forty, why their grandfather had died even before Mingjue was born. It had been a week or two after A-Die died, and he'd been terrified that there was a curse on their family, that now Mingjue was clan leader, he would leave him too. Da-ge had shaken his head, pulling Huaisang into his lap and holding him tightly.

"I'm not going to leave you, didi," he promised. "Don't worry about it, okay A-Sang? I'll protect you. I promise."

It wasn't a no, but Huaisang had only been a child at the time, and he hadn't figured that out. It wasn't a no.

Well, if Nie Mingjue thought they were going to talk about Huaisang stabbing himself in the chest later, that could wait. For one thing, Nie Huaisang thought it was perfectly clear that he wouldn't ever do something like that unless he was completely and utterly desperate, which he wasn't. But Da-ge... Da-ge... he couldn't die. He wouldn't. Huaisang would make sure of it.

He had to. He certainly hadn't seemed to have done a good job of avenging him.

While Huaisang was trying to process all of this, his day had got worse *again*. Because then he had realised that this story ended with Xichen-ge genuinely missing, at the mercy of Jin Guangyao – a Jin Guangyao who would torture children to make their parents behave. He couldn't imagine Jin Guangyao hurting Lan Xichen, but before this morning he'd never dreamt that Jin Guangyao could kill Da-ge, either. And even if he didn't intend to hurt Lan Xichen, that didn't mean that he *wouldn't* – Jin Zixuan had said Jin Guangyao had tried to make Wei-xiong wipe Xichen-ge's memories in the future – what if he did that, now? What if, in an effort to steal Lan Xichen for himself, he robbed him of everything he knew?

It was enough to make Huaisang want to bawl, honestly. Lan Xichen had been his life almost longer than he could remember – he was Da-ge's closest friend, and he was kind and gentle and thoughtful in a way that most people around Huaisang never allowed themselves to be. Even when Huaisang failed class after class, Xichen-ge never looked at him with any pity or judgement. Silently, Huaisang had thought of Lan Xichen as a second older brother for far longer than he had had the right to call him Er-ge.

Now, he might never see him again, because he'd been snatched by a man Huaisang had trusted over almost anyone. Huaisang felt very sick.

Especially when they went down into the city, and discovered that when Jin Zixuan said 'tunnels', what he meant was 'a ridiculously elaborate labyrinth.'

It was only the poorly hidden look of stricken horror on Da-ge's face that had stopped Huaisang from wailing. In fact, no one had made a sound at all. They all knew that the chance of finding any trace of a Jin Guangyao who didn't want to be followed was all but impossible. No one vocalised it.

They just started looking.

Here and there, they had found a couple of hopeful clues – a scrap of golden fabric, snagged on a nail. A pair of damp footprints leading out of a small puddle. A door left just slightly ajar. But these were few and far between, and they might not have even come from Jin Guangyao and Xichen-ge. Even if they had, Huaisang couldn't help but wonder if they hadn't been left there on purpose. Jin Guangyao was clever enough to try that.

It had been hours, now, that they had been walking around cold, dark tunnels, many of them damp, and the bottom of Huaisang's robes were sodden. He'd walked right through a puddle more than once, but he couldn't even bring himself to whine about it. Of course, if he had, there was a chance that either Da-ge, Jiang-Xiong, or Lan Qiren would have bitten his head off.

Then, Huaisang heard footsteps.

It wouldn't have been remarkable, except for the fact that they had all stopped, and were staring at a five-way split in the road. None of them were moving.

“Da-ge!” Huaisang said, in the same moment that everyone else heard the footsteps too, judging by the way they all turned.

Mingjue, Lan Qiren, and Jin Zixuan drew their swords, and Jiang-xiong stepped in front of Huaisang and Zizhen, Zidian sparking on his wrist, but then a figure clad all in white appeared from the gloom, being led towards them by a gold spiritual butterfly.

“Wangji,” said Lan Qiren, sheathing his sword, and Lan Wangji reached them, bowing.

“Shufu.”

“Where's Wei Wuxian?” Jiang-xiong asked tightly, and Lan Wangji glared at him as though he had just spit on his mother's grave.

“Resting,” he said, his voice far colder than usual. “The amulet is destroyed. It took much from him.”

“Is he hurt?” Huaisang asked worriedly, getting in before Jiang-xiong did and hoping that he might earn less intense a glare. He did – Lan Wangji's expression softened slightly at the question.

“Wen Qing said the damage was less extensive than she feared. It would be dangerous for him to exert himself right now, but he will recover. He intends to join us tomorrow. He will come with Sizhui, Jingyi and Jinling, should they all wish to come.”



“Is that long enough?” demanded Jiang-xiong. “What if he’s not recovered enough by tomorrow?”

Lan Wangji threw Jiang-xiong a look so filthy Huaisang flicked out his fan and covered his face by instinct.

“I trust to Wen Qing’s judgement – she knows him well.” Without giving Jiang Cheng any time to reply, Lan Wangji turned to his uncle. In the dim light, his face was pale as the moon, and there was a vulnerability in his eyes that looked very wrong on Hanguang Jun. “Shufu... Xiongzhong?”

“This place is a damned labyrinth,” Da-ge growled. “We’ve found proof someone else has been down here, but nothing that definitely belongs to either of them, yet.”

Lan Wangji’s jaw tightened, his fist clenching around his sword, and Huaisang’s heart ached for him. For all his friendship with Xichen-ge, Huaisang and Lan Wangji had never been close – he had, in fact, been terrified of the stony-faced boy for years – but he knew how close the Twin Jades of Lan were. Still reeling himself, he could only imagine how awful Lan Wangji had to feel.

“Have you tried tracing Shuoyue or Liebing?” Lan Wangji asked, his voice something that – from a Lan – almost sounded desperate.

“There are charms on the walls to draw in any leftover trace of spiritual energy,” said Jin Zixuan regretfully. When Lan Qiren had asked the same question, he had added that the tunnels were built as a means of escape, and therefore would have been poorly fit for purpose if one could easily trace another’s spiritual tool, but he said nothing of it now. Even he seemed to realise that Lan Wangji would not care.

“If we split up, we cover more ground,” he said slowly, as though waiting for the reason why that wouldn’t be a good idea. Sure enough –

“The tunnels are complicated, and it’s easy to get lost,” explained Zixuan. “Traditionally, we can navigate in and out with the messenger butterflies, but that only works because we know our own position, and the exit we want to find – I was only able to show you where we were because I knew roughly where you were, and obviously I know where I am. Unfortunately, as far as I know none of the rest of you know how to perform the spell. It’s rarely taught outside the Jin clan.”

“I know it,” said Lan Wangji, because of course he did. “Jin Guangyao taught Xiongzhong. He said he saw no harm in Xiongzhong teaching me.”

“Well, that’s something we agree on,” said Jin Zixuan, but then he paused, grimacing slightly. “I still think it would be too risky. You only know one exit – if you lose your way it could take you hours just to backtrack. We would lose time.”

Lan Wangji looked away, his fingers as white as the sword they gripped. “Which way now?”

“There’s, uh, a little scuff mark there,” said Zizhen hesitantly. “It looks like the floor is a little dustier in the middle passage, it looks almost like a footprint.”

“Good job,” Jiang Cheng muttered. “That way?”

Lan Wangji all but pushed his way to the front of the group, his eyes widening in horror at the sight of said ‘footprint.’ It was far from conclusive proof.

“It is all we have to go on, Wangji,” said Lan Qiren, and Lan Wangji blinked, the rest of his body still as stone. He looked as hopeless as Huaisang felt.

They walked on.

Jin Zixuan led them deeper and deeper into the tunnels, and at times the walls drew closer together, meaning they had to walk one at a time, or duck their heads a little. The route twisted and turned – more than once someone realised they had walked in a circle, or back upon themselves. Still, they walked, and still they searched.

And still, every now and then, they would find a clue. A smudged footprint. A strand of hair lying on the pale ground. To Huaisang, it seemed almost like someone was toying with them, that someone was leaving them just enough clues to keep them moving, to keep them searching.

The thought made him very cold.

Hours passed.

He wasn’t sure how many. At one point, Da-ge silently pressed a bag of peanuts into his hand, and Huaisang had eaten gratefully, but that was a while ago. Nie Huaisang was certain that the others didn’t feel the time passing – at least not in the same way that he did. They were strong cultivators, all of them, and he was most definitely not. Weariness caught him far sooner than it would catch them, weighing down his arms and his legs, and bringing a gnawing hunger to his stomach.

He didn’t stop. He didn’t even complain. No one wanted to hear it, and for once that was something Huaisang cared about. He was scared for Lan Xichen. He didn’t want the search to slow down because Huaisang had skipped one too many sabre practises.

Besides, maybe if Huaisang had been stronger, he wouldn’t have had to avenge his brother in this other timeline. Maybe, if he hadn’t been so lazy and so useless, his brother would have still been alive.

He gritted his teeth, and ignored the screaming ache of his feet, and carried on. More hours passed, and his hunger began to hum through his veins, his heart becoming too fast, too light. He felt a little dizzy, and a little faint, but no one else even looked tired, so he focused on his breathing (and not on the memory of Lan Xichen teaching him how to use his breath to calm down after an argument with Da-ge.) And Nie Huaisang kept on walking.

He was lagging towards the back of the group, and far too focused on his feet to look for any clues, but he was still there. Still there.

It really was cold down there.

But he could do it. He wasn't useless. He couldn't be useless.

He blinked, and light danced in front of his eyes. Silently, he swore to himself, leaning against the wall of the tunnel for a moment. He couldn't faint – not now. This was important. This was Xichen-ge, and Da-ge needed him too. He could do this. He could do this.

He breathed in, and out, slow as he could manage, and waited for his head to stop spinning. Then, he opened his eyes.

“Oh, fuck...”

Apparently, one of the many downsides to not whining was that you would get forgotten, and subsequently left behind. Sighing, he hurried on down the path, rounding a corner and scurrying on until –

Oh. Wonderful. Another three-way gap in the tunnels. Fantastic.

He wasn't sure which one the others had taken, but it looked like there was a smear of red on the wall of the left-most tunnel, which meant that despite the fact Huaisang's instincts were screaming at him to run away, it was likely the way he was supposed to go. Hopefully, he would be able to catch up with the others before Da-ge noticed he had fallen behind.

He hurried on down the tunnel, and a horrible, metallic smell hit his nose. The hair on the back of his neck stood on end. And then, he stepped in something sticky, and he recognised the stench as that of blood.

Somewhere, fairly nearby, he could hear Da-ge calling his name – his absence had been noticed, then – but his throat felt very dry, and he stepped forward. He wanted to scream, to run towards the sound of Da-ge's voice and then keep on running, but he was so frightened he didn't think he would ever be able to make a sound again.

He turned the corner.

And then he did scream. “*Da-ge!*”

It was a matter of seconds later that Mingjue thundered down the tunnel, seizing Huaisang by the arm, and Lan Wangji was right behind him –

And Lan Wangji made a sound like a wounded animal.

There was a body in the tunnel. A body in white robes, its face hidden against the wall –

*But no*, Huaisang's heart thought desperately, as he clung to his brother's arm. *No, Xichen-ge never wore white. He was always in blue; he always wore blue.*

Lan Wangji swept down at the body's side, rolling it over, and Huaisang's knees went out from beneath him. Da-ge caught him with practised ease, but for once he said nothing, holding Huaisang up and holding him close, letting out a shaking breath.

It was a stranger. A dead stranger. His robes, Huaisang realised, were not of Gusu Lan...

"Moling Su," said Lan Wangji, looking up at the others.

"Moling Su?" repeated Jin Zixuan. "Do you know his name? What is he doing here?"

"I will know," said Lan Wangji darkly, sitting down on the cold, blood-soaked ground, and pulling out his guqin.

Nie Huaisang shivered as the unfamiliar notes of Inquiry rang through the air.

## Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed that chapter! It turned out longer than I anticipated, but I don't think that's too much of a bad thing! Please do let me know what you thought if you have the chance/inclination, I do love reading your comments.

Until next time, take care!

# Chapter 24

## Chapter Notes

Hi there! Sorry about the delay with this chapter - real life got in the way. Thank you for all your wonderful feedback for the last chapter, I really appreciate it!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Nie Mingjue had never told anyone the whole truth behind Meng Yao's banishment from Qinghe. Once, just before they swore brotherhood, he had tried to tell Xichen, but the younger man hadn't wanted to know.

"Is it so bad that it cannot already be counted as atoned for after all he did for us during the war? After he saved my life? I would not be here without him, Mingjue-xiong," he had said, and then he smiled softly. "I would not be here if you hadn't banished him. Perhaps things have happened for a reason."

If Meng Yao – or Jin Guangyao, as he had been by then – was going to atone for taking one life by saving another, Lan Xichen's was certainly one of the few that Mingjue would think valuable enough to afford forgiveness. But still, doubt had lingered. He dreamt of it, sometimes, the look on Jin Guangyao's face when he'd plunged the Wen blade into the captain of the guard's chest. It haunted him, that grim, sick satisfaction, that smirk that had lasted until Nie Mingjue had roared out Meng Yao's name.

But he had never told Lan Xichen. He had never told Huaisang, either, no matter how many times he protested or argued or begged. Eventually, after Jin Guangyao had made a few diplomatic trips to Qinghe without being tossed out, Huaisang seemed content enough to stop asking. Mingjue had only wanted to protect his brothers.

And until today, that had included Jin Guangyao. He hadn't *trusted* him, not since the murder and most definitely not since Wen Ruohan's palace, but he still cared about Jin Guangyao. He still admired his mind and his work ethic, still looked back affectionately on conversations they'd shared, before the world had turned on its head. If Nie Mingjue had not privately regarded Meng Yao as a shidi, or even another didi, the other man would never have left Qinghe alive after murdering the captain. The betrayal had struck Mingjue like an axe to the heart, but even as anger and distrust replaced his trust and admiration for Meng Yao, he had still cared for the younger man. He'd hoped that in swearing brotherhood, he could steer him back to a better path, that if he was strict enough and stern enough, one day he would find the man he thought he'd known.

Nie Mingjue was a fool.

Xichen and Huaisang would be better protected if he had told them the truth.

*Still, a voice an awful lot like Huaisang's murmured in the back of his mind, even you never thought he was capable of all the things they said he's done.*

*Still, he thought back fiercely, shifting his arm around Huaisang to take a little more of his brother's weight, it is my failing.*

Huaisang's fingers were digging painfully into his arm, his grip stronger than Nie Mingjue would have thought him capable of. He drew him closer, and Huaisang shuddered, pressing his head back against Mingjue's chest.

On the ground in front of them, Wangji was playing, his face tight with fear and focus, and a few paces away, Lan Qiren began to speak softly, interpreting the guqin language for the rest of them.

*"What is your name?"*

*"Su Guozhi."*

*"Is this your body?"*

*"Yes."*

*"Who killed you?"*

*"Jin Guangyao."*

It was the answer that Nie Mingjue expected, but it still made anger and betrayal coil in his gut. From the clench of Wangji's jaw, he felt something similar. *"Tell me what happened."*

*"I was standing guard with Su-zongzhu, in the entrance of the tunnels. I was instructed not to ask questions. Jin Guangyao arrived, and Zewu Jun was with him. Su-zongzhu struck Zewu Jun with a talisman, and he fell."*

Lan Qiren's voice tightened as he translated, and Mingjue caught the sight of Wangji's minuscule flinch.

*"I was confused. Alarmed. Su-zongzhu ordered me to carry Zewu Jun. Jin Guangyao ordered that I take care. I obeyed. We moved through the tunnels. Here, I asked where we were going. I received no answer. I asked Su-zongzhu if we were kidnapping Zewu Jun – I asked why. He said it was not my place to ask questions. I paused. Jin Guangyao told Su-zongzhu to take Zewu Jun from me. He thanked me for my service, and said it was no longer required. Then, Jin Guangyao killed me."*

Anger churned in Mingjue's gut, fury towards Jin Guangyao for cutting down a man for having a conscience, towards Su She for failing to protect his disciple as he should have. But his anger was smothered by fear, and before him, Lan Wangji was playing with trembling fingers.

And in a low voice, Lan Qiren translated, *"Was Zewu Jun alive?"*

Nie Mingjue breathed in sharply, and he felt rather than heard Huaisang whimper in his arms. The reply was swift, and Lan Qiren's voice was a little smoother as he translated it.

*"Yes. Unconscious, but he was breathing. Jin Guangyao ordered Su-zongzhu to take care."*

Relief and anger washed over Mingjue in equal measure, and he took a deep breath.

*"Which way did they go?"*

*"East, down the tunnels. They turned left."*

*"And then?"*

*"I do not know."*

*"Where were they going?"*

*"I do not know."*

*"Who else was here?"*

*"Jin Guangyao, Su-zongzhu, Zewu Jun, three Jin guards."*

*"Their names?"*

*"I do not know."*

*"Do you know anything else that could help us find them?"*

*"No."*

Nie Mingjue could see Lan Wangji's frustration grow with every useless answer. His jaw was clenching tighter and tighter, and other than his hands the rest of his body was almost alarmingly still. At the final 'No,' he let his hands all but fall onto the strings, which gave an odd, unpleasant sound.

"Wangji," Lan Qiren reprimanded, and Nie Mingjue was too tired not to glare at him. He couldn't imagine Wangji felt any better than he did, and surely a lifetime of perfect behaviour should be enough to afford him some slack in a situation such as this. Xichen hated it when his uncle was over strict on his brother. He hated it.

Luckily for everyone's eardrums, Lan Qiren didn't see Mingjue's glare. He was too busy looking at Wangji, who gritted his teeth and played another few notes on the guqin. A farewell, no doubt. After a moment, he stowed his qin and stood up.

"He... he didn't hide the body," Huaisang said quietly, squeezing Mingjue's arm. "He would have known there was a chance we'd find the tunnels. Find the body – speak with him. Killing a man to silence him is useless if he didn't banish the spirit, too. He, he would've known that."

“Shit...” muttered Jiang Wanyin.

“Is it a trap?” Zizhen asked hesitantly, worry clear on his face.

“Probably,” Nie Mingjue growled, staring at the bloodied corpse. “Though for all his brains, Jin Guangyao has never been any good at improvising. I think, Jin-gongzi, it makes sense if we split up now. That way if it is a trap, we’re not all walking into it together. Wangji, Huaisang and I will go left, if the rest of you go right.”

It wasn’t exactly an ideal combination, especially with Huaisang being in the smaller group, but Mingjue couldn’t see a better option. He wasn’t about to let his didi out of his sight anytime soon, and Wangji and Jin Zixuan had to be in separate groups – they were the only ones who knew how to cast the Jin butterfly spell, and therefore the only ones who could definitively find a way out. Though Mingjue neither knew nor cared exactly what was going on between them, it seemed a poor choice to put Jiang Wanyin and Wangji in the same group, and the former had also expressed an intention to keep an eye on Wei Zizhen. That would mean that Jiang Wanyin and Wei Zizhen would both be in Jin Zixuan’s group, and it would make sense to have a Lan among each party.

Wangji and Lan Qiren seemed to agree with his logic, given their identical, sombre nods.

Jin Zixuan pursed his lips. “If you run into any trouble, Lan Wangji could only lead you to a single exit.”

Nie Mingjue glanced at Wangji, and the cold, grim determination in the younger man’s eyes. He gave a short nod. “I don’t think that’ll be a problem.”

“What if it *is* a trap?” asked Zizhen softly, his face twisted with worry.

“We won’t be walking into it blind. And you’ll know where we’ve gone.”

The teen did not look convinced, but he didn’t argue, instead looking down at his sword and pursing his lips. The blade looked vaguely familiar, though Mingjue couldn’t quite place it. Frankly, he didn’t care to.

Apparently having decided that enough conversation had been had, Wangji turned, striding eastward down the passageway without so much as a word. Shaking his head, Mingjue followed, hooking his arm around Huaisang’s waist to take most of his weight as he dragged him along the corridor. It could have just been the sight of the butchered body, but there was an unnaturally white pallor to his brother’s face, and Mingjue didn’t like it.

He dug into his pocket, pulling out another of the small snack pouches he always kept on him when travelling with Huaisang. Usually, he was a menace when he was hungry, but Mingjue preferred that to this pale, quiet alternative.

“Here,” he muttered, pressing the small back of dried fruit into Huaisang’s hands.

“Thank you, Da-ge,” Huaisang whispered, opening his mouth and pouring the entire bag into it in one go. Mingjue rolled his eyes, but said nothing, instead taking a little extra care to



make sure his brother didn't trip and choke.

They walked on, and the tunnel turned sharply left.

"There's no pathway right," Jiang Wanyin said in surprise, earning himself a glare from Wangji. Mingjue had to admit, though, he was a little surprised, too. So far, the tunnels had been constantly intertwining, spreading off in all directions, and this was the longest piece of uninterrupted hallway that they'd found. None of them had suspected that when the ghost said Jin Guangyao had turned left, there would not also be an option to go right.

"Let's just keep moving."

They walked on. There were more clues now – drops of blood here, smears of red on the walls there. The tunnel carved downwards, still a single track, and Nie Mingjue's heart began to pick up speed in his chest. It would be a good place for an ambush – there was little space, and it would be easy to block them off from either side.

Nothing happened. Nothing happened, and they kept walking, and Huaisang began to stumble, even with Mingjue bearing most of his weight.

"Da-ge," he mumbled. "I think it's tomorrow."

Mingjue gave a grunt of agreement, glancing over the others. They all looked tired, even Wangji, who tried to hide it with the stiffness of his shoulders and the clench of his jaw. Neither of the Lan had said anything about resting for bedtime, not that Mingjue would've expected them to, but he was sure the hour had passed. They had been searching for Xichen for hours.

Hours, and they still had next to nothing.

With a sigh, Mingjue looped Huaisang's arm over his shoulder, keeping his other arm tight around his brother's waist so that now he was carrying him entirely. It was far from ideal, but he knew full well that Huaisang wouldn't easily accept being sent back – even if Mingjue had been willing to let him out of his sight.

"I... I can help, Da-ge," he mumbled, but his head was lolling against Mingjue's shoulder, and Mingjue let it.

Sometime later, the tunnel began to slope upwards, so steeply their pace slowed a little. Still, they walked on, and on, until they came to a stone door that Jin Zixuan had to open with a smear of his own blood.

There, Mingjue pinched Huaisang's arm and stood him on his own two feet, drawing Baxia just in case. Jin Zixuan pushed the door open, and a surge of cold air greeted them.

Then, they stepped outside into the pitch black of night, and Mingjue's heart sank. The tunnel's exit was camouflaged against a stone hill in the middle of a forest – a forest that was silent but for the call of night birds. They were in the middle of nowhere, and he could see no footprints or blood or trail. Jin Guangyao could have gone anywhere.

Reluctantly, he clamped a hand on Wangji's shoulder, grimacing sympathetically at the wide-eyed young man. "I think it's time we rest."

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There was a bad taste in his mouth. It was strange, sharp and bitter and utterly unfamiliar. He didn't think he knew what it was, but it was unpleasant, and it was the first thing he noticed when his mind muddled into consciousness.

The second thing he notice was that he felt terrible. His head was throbbing with a hot, dull pain, and his throat was aching as though it had been years since he'd had so much as a sip of water. His stomach was roiling with nausea, and his limbs felt heavy. Very heavy.

It was hard to concentrate. Even as he catalogued the pain it was hard to focus on what, exactly, he felt, let alone where he was or how he got there. Slowly, he was able to crack open his eyes, but the world around him was out of focus, and looked far away. He was in a dimly lit room – that much he could tell – but it didn't look like the Hanshi. But no – he wouldn't be in the Hanshi, because he had been in Lanling... He had been in Lanling to, for... something. But from what he could make out of the blur of the room, it didn't look much like he was in his guest quarters at Jinlintai, either.

Perhaps it was an infirmary – that would make sense. He didn't remember falling ill, but he certainly felt unwell now. Vaguely, he wondered at that. Cultivators rarely got sick – with a golden core one could fight off most infections without any real effort. Had he been injured? He didn't remember being injured, and he thought infections usually took a little while to set in.

A deep sense of unease pooled in his chest, seeping through his veins like poison, and he took a deep breath. Something was wrong. He wasn't sure what – other than the fact that he obviously felt awful. Slowly, he remembered what he had been doing in Jinlintai, he remembered how worried his brother had been as to whether or not Wei Wuxian would show up.

Was that what had gone wrong?

"Wangji..." his voice was raw and weak, and he winced to hear it. How long had he been sleeping?

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the rustle of robes, white robes, but the one wearing them was turning, leaving, and Lan Xichen's heart sank slightly. It wasn't Wangji – Wangji would never walk away from him like that, especially not if Xichen was barely conscious. So who was it? Presumably one of his own disciples, but he hadn't got a glimpse of their face.

"Wait," he whispered, but they had already gone. He let out a sigh, and tried to raise his hand to rub his eyes –

And he drew in a sharp gasp.

He couldn't move. His limbs didn't just feel heavy – they wouldn't *move*. His fingers, he thought, were twitching, but he couldn't raise his hand, or shift his arms, and he couldn't

move his legs or lift his head up –

Xichen's alarm turned to horror in the span of a heartbeat. He couldn't *move*, he couldn't move, and he didn't know where he was, and it *hurt*, and he didn't understand, and –

“Er-ge?”

Lan Xichen gasped again, this time in relief, forcing his eyes to focus on the blurred figure hurrying across the room. As he reached the side of the bed, A-Yao's sad, gentle face came into view, and Xichen's fear began to slip back away, as quickly as it had come.

“A-Yao...”

A-Yao winced, quite possibly at the rasp of his voice. “Here,” he murmured, holding a cup to Xichen's lips, and raising his head with a gentle hand. Xichen drank gratefully, shuddering as the cool water slipped down his throat. It was such a relief... “How are you feeling?”

“Not... not good,” he said, swallowing. It was difficult to talk. “What happened?”

“You fell ill, on the way down into Lanling,” said A-Yao concernedly. “Do you not remember?”

Xichen thought back. His memories seemed muddled.

“Er-ge?”

“I... I remember... going for a walk... There was... I don't remember...” Panic began to swirl within him again. Why didn't he remember? Was it a curse? “A-Yao-”

“It's alright,” A-Yao promised, taking his hand. “It's alright, Er-ge. You're safe. You will be fine. Just breathe for a moment, Er-ge. Just breathe.”

Xichen obeyed shakily. He was good at obeying. “I can't move.”

A-Yao nodded, his features blurring slightly with the movement. “Are you in any pain?”

“Some,” Xichen admitted, and A-Yao nodded again.

“Here,” he said kindly, raising a cup to Xichen's lips. “This will help the pain.”

A sharp, bitter scent hit Xichen's nose, and he paused. That was the taste, the bad taste in his mouth.

“Er-ge,” A-Yao said, “you trust me, don't you?”

Guilt fluttered through Xichen's heart. The bad taste was just medicine – if A-Yao was giving it, what else would it be?

“Of course, A-Yao,” he said. “I'm sorry.”

A-Yao smiled. “There's no need to be sorry, Er-ge. Drink – you'll feel better.”

Xichen obeyed, grimacing despite himself as the awful taste hit his tongue. A-Yao made a noise of sympathy.

“I know it tastes unpleasant, Er-ge, but it will help with the pain, I promise.”

Already, Xichen could feel a strange sort of numbness dulling the pain in his head and his throat, and he tried to nod. “I trust you.”

He felt A-Yao squeeze his hand, and then he felt a hand on his hair. The room was growing dimmer, and his body felt heavier than ever as the new numbness crept through him. He didn’t like it, and he wanted to stay awake, but his eyes were closing of their own accord, no matter how he struggled to keep them open.

“It’s alright, Er-ge,” A-Yao murmured. “Everything’s going to be just fine.”

And then the darkness swallowed Xichen whole.

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Jin Guangyao sighed as Xichen’s eyes fluttered closed, his body once more sinking limply into the bed. He did not want to drug Er-ge, but unfortunately it was the safest option. Until he had decided exactly what he was going to do long term, it was best to keep Xichen unconscious, unaware. Out of the way. To keep him safe.

The particular potion he was currently using was by far the best choice – for the most part, it would keep Xichen utterly unconscious, and should he wake, unable to move. Though Er-ge’s core was strong enough to call for a particularly high dosage, there were very few recorded cases of long-term side effects, and he was confident that Xichen would recover fully, as soon as the drug was no longer necessary.

As of yet, Jin Guangyao was unsure when that would be. Having a Lan Xichen who still believed in him unconditionally was an unexpected blessing, and it was one he was intent on keeping, but he had not yet decided the best way as to how.

The wistful, childish part of his brain suggested weaving a story of political backstabbing and treachery, of telling Lan Xichen that their lives were in danger – perhaps Jin Guangshan wanted them both dead, or Wei Wuxian had threatened to murder them both. Of their simply running away together into the sunset. But even if Xichen was cowardly enough to run from such things, he would never consent to leave Wangji behind. Of course, Hanguang Jun’s death was always an option. Lan Wangji was not Xichen’s only anchor to his life in the cultivation world, but he was definitely the strongest. If he told Xichen – or better yet, *proved* – that his little brother was dead, that all they had was each other...

Even then, it would be difficult, but Jin Guangyao didn’t need to figure out the specifics of that now. He needed to focus on his next step – one that had to be taken before they went any further. Jin Guangyao had possessed a weak golden core all his adult life, but a weak core was infinitely better than the awful, gaping emptiness inside him.

It had to be remedied. Once, he would have thought that impossible, but he knew better now. Wei Wuxian had given Jiang Cheng his golden core. A transfer was possible.

And Jin Guangyao knew how he was going to do it.

## Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed that chapter - please do let me know if you did! I love reading your comments, and hearing your theories. Until next time, please take care.

## Chapter 25

### Chapter Notes

Hi everyone! Thank you so much for your lovely comments, and for your patience - in my household Christmas is a week-long event, so I've been pretty busy, but I should be able to get back to an every-three-days schedule from now on!

Also, a quick content warning for this chapter - there are a couple of references to child abuse due to the Mo family being the worst. There's nothing too explicit, but just a head's up!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

*The world stopped around Lan Wangji at the sound of Nie Huaisang's scream. Whipping around, he ran back through the tunnels, the others melting away into the darkness, falling away into the walls, and he rounded the corner –*

*And there was a body on the ground –*

*It was shorter than Xiongzhang, and it was wearing white, and Xiongzhang never wore white, he wore blue, he always wore blue, but Wangji couldn't breathe, and the world moved in slow motion as he fell to his knees, grabbing the shoulder that had to belong to a stranger, pulling him around –*

*And his brother's eyes stared up at him, empty and unseeing.*

*He could feel the scream tearing from his throat, but there was no sound, he couldn't make a sound, and Wangji shook his xiongzhang desperately, harder and harder, but Xichen wouldn't shift or flinch or blink, and his face was slack and expressionless in a way it never, ever was, and he was gone, he was dead, he was dead.*

*And then Wangji was falling, plummeting down through the earth, away from his brother, and he reached out for Xiongzhang and tried to scream again, but there was no noise and no sound and he landed outside a house surrounded by gentians, and a door that would never open – but no, the gentians were changing, mutating into bamboo, and the house became the Hanshi, and Wangji was still kneeling, because that door would never open –*

Lan Wangji woke with a gasp, his eyes snapping open to a cool, grey morning. He wasn't kneeling. There was no need to kneel. No need to kneel.

Not yet.

He let his eyes flutter closed again, just for a moment, relief settling over him like a thin, threadbare blanket – not quite warm enough to give any real comfort. He breathed in deeply,

trying to settle himself, and opened his eyes again. Dawn had been and gone, and the hour had to be considerably later than five, but they had finally stopped to rest long after nine, and Wangji felt like he'd slept less than four hours. Nearby, Lan Qiren was meditating, his hand on the hilt of his sword. He had either not noticed or ignored Wangji's nightmare, and Lan Wangji was too tired to worry which it was. Either way, he was grateful.

The others were all asleep – Nie Mingjue was upright with his back against a nearby tree, much like Wangji himself, except he also had Huaisang slumped over in his lap. His hand was on Huaisang's shoulder, and the younger man gave a sniff, snuffling closer to his brother. Behind them, he saw Jiang Wanyin on the ground, his back to Wangji, his shoulders taut, beside Jin Zixuan and Wei Zizhen.

He took another slow, deep breath, gazing up at the clouded smudge of the sky. It was still early – Shufu would have woken them all if it was not.

A cold, brittle voice in the back of his mind wondered whether it even mattered. Where were they even going to look? The whole world had opened out in front of them, and Xiongzhong could be anywhere. They were back to the first step, again. Why did it matter how quickly they woke when they didn't know where to start?

There was a strange, hitched sound behind him, and Wangji glanced back towards the others. Wei Zizhen had twisted around, and was now facing Wangji, his face contorted as though he was in pain. Lan Wangji sat up straighter, and the boy whimpered, his eyes darting wildly beneath his eyelids.

Sympathy twanged through Wangji with the memory of his own nightmare, and he rose to his feet, walking over to the boy and then, a little hesitantly, shaking his shoulder. Almost at once, Zizhen's eyes flew open, focusing through a haze of panic to see Wangji, and then he breathed out slowly.

“Hanguang Jun...”

Wangji nodded. He wasn't exactly sure what to say. He knew full well that he didn't want to talk about his own dreams, but he was aware that it was something others found useful. He waited, and Zizhen sat up.

“What time is it?” the boy murmured, looking a little uncomfortable as he wrapped an arm around his stomach.

Lan Wangji glanced at the sky, trying to gauge the position of the sun through the clouds. “Perhaps eight. I am not sure.”

Zizhen nodded, glancing at the others. He looked every young, and Wangji hesitated, thinking of how proudly and fondly he spoke of Wei Ying.

“Are you... okay?”

The boy blinked as though surprised, but then he gave a sad, shy smile and nodded, ducking his head. “I'm fine. I... it's a lot. But I'll be okay.”

Wangji nodded, grateful that Zizhen hadn't suddenly started talking about his feelings, but also feeling slightly guilty that he was grateful. He was spared having to think on it any further by his uncle.

"I think it is time for the others to wake," he said sternly, rising to his feet. "We must discuss how best to proceed from here."

Wangji did not argue, helping Lan Qiren wake the camp. Nie Huaisang moaned and protested, whining about breakfast, but Mingjue didn't snap or shut him down, instead saying that some food would do them all good. That, plus something in the slight slur of Huaisang's speech and odd paleness of his face made Wangji wonder if there was a genuine need behind the younger man's whining. Either way, he did not protest when Mingjue pulled some rations from his Qiankun sleeve and began to make a quick congee for breakfast. Chifengzun may be indulgent with his brother in Qinghe, but rarely on the road, and Wangji knew he would never put Huaisang's comfort over Xichen's safety.

As they finished eating, Wangji caught sight of shapes in the sky – cultivators on swords, coming closer. He rose, an undeniable sense of relief settling over him as he saw Wei Ying and Sizhui, flanked either side by Jinling and Jingyi. As they drew nearer, however, he saw that Jinling looked absolutely furious, the resemblance to Jiang Wanyin uncanny, and there was concern on Wei Ying's face.

Dread settled heavily in Wangji's chest, his heart beating faster as if to flee from it. Had something happened at Lotus Pier? To the Wen, to A-Yuan? Was someone hurt?

The four landed, Wei Ying immediately stepping forward slightly, so that Sizhui, Jingyi and Jinling were behind him. They bowed, but Wei Ying kept his eyes warily on Nie Mingjue, even as he rose.

"Nie-zongzhu," he greeted carefully. "Lan-xiansheng, Jin-gongzi."

"Wei-gongzi," Nie Mingjue replied gravely, and Huaisang gave a weary wave with his fan.

"It's good to see you, Wei-xiong," he said, smiling weakly.

Something softened in Wei Ying's face, and he smiled sadly at Nie Huaisang. "You too, Nie-xiong."

"How did everything go?" asked Jiang Wanyin anxiously, and Wei Ying turned his smile to his brother. It didn't quite meet his eyes.

"It was fine. I-"

"It was not fine!" Jinling snapped, apparently unable to hold his tongue for a moment longer. With wide, indignant eyes, he strode over to Jiang Wanyin, pointing his finger at Wei Ying. "Jiujiu, he ran away!"

Wangji's heart twisted in his chest, and his eyes snapped to Wei Ying in time to see the other man wince.



“He *what?*” said Jiang Wanyin dangerously.

“No one ‘ran away,’” protested Jingyi, crossing his arms over his chest. There was a slight smirk on his face. Beside him, Sizhui was looking rather intently at his own feet. “Jinling’s just angry he wasn’t invited.”

“I should’ve been invited – it’s my uncle! But that’s not the point. Jiujiu, the three of them just left, without telling anyone what they were doing or where they were going and –”

The boy’s angry protestations faded into the background as Wangji stared at Wei Ying, his heart stumbling in his chest. Wei Ying should have been resting – he was supposed to have been *resting*. Wangji had only been able to bear leaving him behind because he knew that Wei Ying needed it. The memory of the destruction of the amulet struck him like a blow – how fragile Wei Ying had felt afterwards, gasping and shivering in Lan Wangji’s arms, how pale he was when his eyelids fluttered closed. Those horrible minutes Wangji spent waiting for him to wake up, for Wei Ying to be well enough to fly – not to mention how thoroughly the flight had drained him.

Wei Ying shouldn’t have been running anywhere. It could have hurt him – it could have killed him –

Lan Wangji stepped forward before he knew he was moving, closing his hand around Wei Ying’s wrist, and Wei Ying looked at him sombrely.

“Lan Zhan, I didn’t run away,” he swore, his voice ringing with a sincerity Wangji ached to believe. “I promise – and I didn’t do anything I promised you or Wen Qing I wouldn’t. I left Chenqing behind and didn’t do anything other than talk. But Sizhui and Jingyi and I *did* take a little trip to fetch Mo Xuanyu.”

“Who?” asked Nie Huaisang.

“My youngest known brother,” said Jin Zixuan, frowning heavily. “Is he alright?”

“Now,” said Wei Ying, nodding. There was a darkness in his eyes that sent a chill down Lan Wangji’s spine. “He’s alright *now*.”

Jiang Wanyin sighed heavily, pinching the bridge of his nose. “And you didn’t tell anyone where you were going?”

“It was urgent,” protested Wei Ying, but there was a slight hint of defeat in his tone as he continued. “But I understand that I could’ve sent someone else or got help from the disciples. I’ve already had the lecture three ways, Jiang Cheng.”

Jiang Wanyin looked as though he was going to argue for a moment, but then his shoulders slumped, and he shook his head slightly. “Was it *really* that urgent? He wasn’t in any immediate danger, was he?”

At once, Sizhui and Jingyi stiffened, exchanging a worried glance, and Jinling pursed his lips, looking down at his feet. Wei Ying’s eyes darkened further, and Wangji saw his hand tighten

around Chenqing.

“He had a bruise the size of my fist over his eye. And a footprint, on his chest.”

Jiang Wanyin’s eyes widened, and his jaw clenched, Zidian sparking on his wrist. For once, Lan Wangji could understand the anger – it hissed around his own heart too. “What did you do?”

Lan Wangji breathed in sharply, the accusation filling him with rage, but Wei Ying shook his head, apparently finding a different meaning in his brother’s words. “Nothing – justice or revenge would’ve counted as over-exertion, and I promised not to do that. Besides, we’ve got more immediate problems. When things are settled, if Mo Nianzhen wishes to seek justice for the treatment of her son I will help her. If she doesn’t... Well, then they can count themselves lucky and live in peace.” He paused, looking at Lan Wangji. His eyes softened slightly, and he put a hand over Wangji’s. “I promise, Lan Zhan. I didn’t take any unnecessary risks. I wouldn’t. Not now. So where are we?”

“We’ve no clear indication of which way they could have gone,” said Nie Mingjue, blunt as ever. “Unless you know of a way to track swords through the air.”

Wei Ying frowned, his eyes glazing over slightly in concentration, but then he shook his head, wincing slightly as he looked at Wangji. “I don’t... I don’t know. I might be able to come up with something, but it would take time. I’m sorry.”

“No need,” said Wangji quietly. He glanced at Jingyi and Sizhui, still standing where they had landed, and at Jinling. “Do any of you know the name Su Guozhi?”

They shook their heads, and Wei Ying frowned. “Why?”

“He is dead,” said Wangji. “Jin Guangyao killed him. He expressed discomfort when Su She... incapacitated Xiongzhong.”

Wei Ying hissed, his hand squeezing tighter over Wangji’s, and behind him Sizhui pursed his lips shut tightly, his eyes wide and worried.

“Wei Wuxian,” said Lan Qiren, and Wangji tensed slightly. “You said it would take you time. How much?”

Wei Ying grimaced slightly. “I’m not sure. Creating spells and talismans, it’s... it isn’t easy. It could be days, maybe longer, if it’s even possible...”

“I would like you to try,” said Lan Qiren, to Wangji’s surprise. “We could run around for weeks in these woods and find nothing – days spent in the making of a tracking spell would be of infinitely more use than days spent moving in the wrong direction. While you study, the rest of us should split into two groups – one to search the forest, and the other to return to Lanling and see what they can learn of Su Guozhi, and what else they can find in the city.”

Jin Zixuan nodded slowly. “That makes sense – A-Ling, do you know these woods?” Jinling nodded back, and his father smiled at him. “I hate the idea of separating again, but it would

likely be of more use for you to help search the woods, if you know them. Meanwhile, I can get us almost anywhere in Lanling. Nie-gongzi, I don't doubt you would be able to help me."

Nie Huaisang flicked open his fan anxiously, but he also gave a decisive nod. "I'll do my best."

Jin Zixuan smiled, but then it faltered a little, and he glanced between Jinling and Jiang Wanyin. "Jiang Cheng..."

The young clan leader nodded once. "I'll search the woods. Sizhui and Jingyi should stay with Wei Wuxian, in case he needs any help."

Wangji expected Wei Ying to protest, but instead he pursed his lips, his eyes narrowed in thought for a moment. "That would be helpful," he admitted.

"I'm not sure any of us should be alone right now," Sizhui added in a mumble, and Lan Wangji nodded, shifting slightly so that he was a little closer to his son.

"Agreed," said Jiang Wanyin, glancing at Zizhen. "Are you happy to search the woods with us?"

"I'm happy to do anything, as long as it helps," the boy insisted earnestly.

"In that case, Wangji should go with Huaisang and Jin-gongzi to Lanling," said Nie Mingjue, and Wangji stiffened. Logically, he knew that he was more likely to find a lead in the city than in the woods but doubling back meant ignoring the process they had already made, and it meant leaving Wei Ying – again. He forced himself to nod, to quash down the childish weakness that made him want to stay with Wei Ying or his Shufu. Then, he turned to Wei Ying.

"What do you need?"

Wei Ying's eyes glazed over slightly in concentration, and he frowned. "I stocked up on talisman paper and ink and notepaper before I left Lotus Pier, and a couple of books too... More would be ideal, but I doubt even the Peacock could get me into Jinlintai's library, and it would take a long time and a lot of explaining to turn up at Gusu. I – I think I can do without. I can work here – it makes sense to stay nearby – if there's anything to track it won't be around forever. All I need is to be able to focus."

"We'll make sure you're safe," Sizhui promised, and Jingyi nodded eagerly.

A lump grew in Wangji's throat, and he tried not to wonder who would protect them. They were armed, now, both boys, and they were strong enough cultivators to travel at great speeds and distances – something that implied they were also good fighters. Still, he didn't want to leave.

"Here," Wei Ying said quietly, passing him a talisman, and then handing another to Jiang Wanyin. "If we get in any trouble, I'll send a message through these. If you get into any

trouble, just feed them spiritual energy. I'll feel it." He paused, and then squeezed Wangji's hand. "Go, Lan Zhan. We'll be okay – and I'll do my best. I promise."

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Wen Qing felt as though she must have fallen into a dream. Two days ago, she had been on her knees on the harsh stone of the Burial Mounds, praying that Jin Rulan's one-month celebration would go smoothly, that Wei Wuxian and A-Ning would return home safely, afterwards. It had been a long time since she prayed with any real faith anyone would hear, but with nothing else she could do she had knelt and prayed as hard as she could. It wouldn't even matter, she had thought, which home Wei Wuxian returned to.

After all he sacrificed for them, he deserved to go *home* – to go back to the Lotus Pier that he'd so heartbreakingly tried to recreate in the dead wasteland of the Burial Mounds, to the sister he had so obviously ached for, to the brother he'd ripped himself apart for. He deserved to be forgiven, to have the safety of a clan once again. He *wanted* to go home, and she knew he did – she was amazed that he had returned to the Burial Mounds after meeting Jiang Yanli and Jiang Wanyin in Yiling, and the chances of his being able to tear himself away from his baby nephew had to be thin.

There was A-Yuan, of course, tethering him here, and his ridiculous notion that he still, somehow, owed the Wen, but perhaps he would be able to take A-Yuan with him. The Wen could take care of themselves, and Wei Wuxian deserved so much better. Wen Qing would grieve for the loss of his companionship, but not as much as she would enjoy the knowledge that he was safe, and well.

But if he couldn't go back to Lotus Pier, Wen Qing had prayed that he would at least be able to come back to the Burial Mounds, that it would all end peacefully. That he would come home, to either home, and be safe.

For once, her prayers had been answered, but in a way so strange and bizarre she half expected to wake up to A-Ning shaking her shoulders and saying she'd been having fever dreams. Somehow, the time-travel aspect hardly seemed like the strangest part.

Because today, *she* was standing in Lotus Pier, surrounded by peaceful waters and lotus flowers, and by Jiang Clan members who bowed their heads when they saw her. Jiang Clan members who had helped her family settle into *guest rooms*, who had needed only to hear the word of Jiang Wanyin and Jiang Jianyu to declare that the Wen were of Yunmeng, that they were under protection, that they were *safe*.

And A-Yuan, who she thought would have to be smuggled out of the Burial Mounds if he ever wanted a chance at a normal life, was being *doted* on by the Jiang disciples – he had been slipped at least four candies since breakfast, and had gained two balls, a toy bow and arrow, three dolls, and a little hand puppet, and it was barely even noon.

Now, A-Yuan was running off his sugar rush, playing with Mo Xuanyu and Jiang clan's xiao-shidi and xiao-shimei, a pair of twins named Jiang Aiyan and Jiang Lijie. At six years old, they provided a good bridge between A-Yuan and Mo Xuanyu's ages, and they brought with them a bubbly enthusiasm that had soon coaxed both boys from their respective shells. It

had taken Mo Xuanyu even longer than A-Yuan to join in with the games, and he still flinched if A-Yuan or the twins yelled too loudly, but by now he was laughing, too.

Wen Qing was sitting on a small bench beside Jiang Yanli, and on another bench on the other side of the courtyard, Popo and Wen Ning were peeling lotus seeds. Mo Nianzhen had been with them until a half hour ago, when two disciples offered to escort her to town to pick up some clothing and bits and pieces to help her and her son settle in. The proud, tearful smile on her face when Mo Xuanyu said shyly that he would like to stay and touched even Wen Qing.

“We used to play this as children,” Jiang Yanli murmured, a fond, wistful smile on her face. She was sitting beside Wen Qing on a small bench overlooking the courtyard where the children played. “I was never any good. I would watch, more often than not.” Her smile faded, and she met Wen Qing’s eyes. “I am sorry, Wen-guniang. I am so sorry. I knew that A-Xian’s heart had to be in the right place, that there had to be a reason he was doing all this, but I – I had no idea how badly your people have suffered. How difficult life has been for you. It’s not fair, and I should have looked closer, and I am sorry. I’m sure you think poorly of me for leaving him in a place like that.”

“No,” Wen Qing said, quietly and immediately. “I wondered, at times. How a sister could not know how her brother was living, where he was, how she could stand never seeing him... But I have never really thought poorly of you. Wei Wuxian always does what he can to hide the darkness from the people he cares about. As far as I can tell, he always has. I don’t think he wanted you to know how he lived. Besides – you have two little brothers, and Jiang Wanyin was still new to the position of zongzhu. I have little doubt he needed you, too.” She had little doubt he had needed her more than Wei Wuxian had, at least in terms of her presence, but safe as Wen Qing may feel she had no desire to insult her hosts.

Jiang Yanli sighed sadly. “He does... A-Cheng... It was difficult for him, when I left for Jinlintai, but I am able to visit, and regularly, and he comes to Lanling often to. More so, while I was pregnant.” She paused, something Wen Qing couldn’t quite recognise tightening her eyes as she gazed down at the baby in her arms. “I tried, you know, when I first moved into Jinlintai. To speak with Jin-zongzhu and Jin-furen, to explain that A-Xian was a good person, to try and spread the truth as widely as the rumours I heard, but no one would listen to me. Before the wedding, Wen Ning told me in Yiling that A-Xian was happy enough – that he was homesick and missed A-Cheng and I, but that he enjoyed inventing and music and playing with A-Yuan, and I thought... I thought it would be enough to make sure he was left alone. That eventually things would die down, and he would be able to come home. So, I let it rest. I told A-Xuan stories of our childhood, funny little things, mostly, and I spoke of A-Xian as often as I could, but I was afraid of making things worse if I pushed. And then... then I fell pregnant, and I was terrified.”

Surprised, Wen Qing glanced at the other woman, and Yanli met her eyes sombrely.

“I was afraid A-Ling would be born as I was,” she explained. “I was born too early. I was very small, and frail, and I have been small and frail ever since. You saw at Cloud Recess that I am prone to illness. In myself it’s something I’ve long since come to accept, but for my baby...” She shuddered slightly, holding Rulan close. “He wasn’t, thank the gods, but until he

was born it was all I could think about.” Her face became thoughtful, and sombre. “A-Xian and A-Cheng get cross if you say as much aloud, but it’s true that my body is weak. I’m not strong enough to sustain a powerful core. It’s bothered them more than it has me. I always thought I would be able to find ways to protect them without one.” She met Wen Qing’s eyes. “If you were to take anyone’s core for A-Cheng, it should have been mine. It is of little use to me.”

Suddenly, Wen Qing felt very cold. She’d had little doubt that soon she would be faced with the wrath of the Jiang siblings regarding the core transfer, and she thought she had answers prepared, but that was not something she had expected to hear. Perhaps she should have – perhaps it was a mistake to think that Jiang Yanli was any less self-sacrificial than her brothers were.

“Do not ask me to take it from you,” she said, her voice hollower and more desperate than she would have liked. “Do not ask me to give it to Wei Wuxian, please-”

Jiang Yanli’s eyes widened slightly, and she reached out to squeeze Wen Qing’s hand, her baby balanced carefully in her other arm. “Oh, Wen-guniang, no. I would not ask that. Perhaps, if he would let me, I would, but as it is, it would break A-Xian’s heart – he would hate himself, for it, and I couldn’t do that to him. I’m sure – I’m sure we can figure out something, but I don’t think it would do us any good to do that.”

Wen Qing let out a breath she hadn’t realised she’d been holding, and Jiang Yanli smiled sadly.

“I understand why you did not tell me, why you helped them send me away, instead -” A ripple of guilt moved through Wen Qing at those words. If Jiang Yanli had helped A-Ning knock out Wen Qing to get her out of the way while they tore out her didi’s golden core, she would not be nearly so calm, even years later. “- I know that A-Xian can be very persuasive – that he never would have allowed you to take my core over his. Logically, I suppose I also know that surgery could be a greater risk for me, too. But it is hard. It’s so hard...” A tear tracked down Jiang Yanli’s cheek, and she smiled weakly at Wen Qing. “I am not angry with you, Wen-guniang. I am upset, but I... I’m not angry. Especially not now, not after you...” She paused, flinching slightly, and swallowed. “Especially knowing how far you would go to try and protect A-Xian.”

With a start, Wen Qing realised that Jiang Yanli was speaking of her death, in that other future. Of Wen Qing and A-Ning and their family going to Jinlintai in a desperate, hopeless attempt to draw the target from Wei Wuxian’s back. A part of her wanted to protest that it hadn’t happened, but it was true that she would do the same again, if she had to. Doubtless Jiang Yanli would not appreciate it if Wen Qing labelled herself Wei Wuxian’s sister, but in her heart he was her brother all the same.

“He has done much for us,” she said evenly, because it was true, and less inflammatory. “Sometimes, I wonder if it isn’t too much.”

Jiang Yanli’s smile grew a little warmer. “A-Xian always gives too much to the people he loves.” When Wen Qing blinked, the other woman’s smile grew a little stronger. “Would you say now that it’s true that of the both of us, I am the only one now with two brothers?”

In Qishan, this would have been a trick or a trap, and no matter how many times Wei Wuxian waxed lyrical about his sister Wen Qing wasn't completely sure that it wasn't, but she answered all the same.

"I would not," she said quietly, and Jiang Yanli's smile grew.

"I am glad," she said. "A-Xian deserves to have all of us. And between us all we may well be able to keep him in one piece for a little longer."

Wen Qing smiled, shaking her head slightly. "Perhaps."

There was a loud thud, and Wen Qing looked up in time to see Mo Xuanyu hit the floor, the toy bow in his hand shattering with a loud crack. A-Yuan and the twins gasped, and the older boy scrambled up, the colour draining from his face at the sight of the broken bow. His eyes flickered between Wen Qing and Jiang Yanli on one bench, and A-Ning and Popo on the other, and he cringed back.

"Are you okay, Xuanyu?" asked A-Yuan, his eyes wide with concern. "Qing-jiejie, Qing-jiejie, he's got blood on him!"

"I'm sorry!" Mo Xuanyu gasped, shaking his head. There was blood on his hand, and a hole in his trousers that suggested he'd taken the skin off his knees, but he looked more afraid than he did pained. "I'm really sorry, I didn't mean it, I promise I didn't mean it, I didn't, I didn't, I-"

"That's enough," Wen Qing said gently, standing up and making her way over. The child flinched, seeming to shrink even as he stayed rooted to the spot. "It was just an accident, you aren't in any trouble."

"Trouble?" echoed Jiang Aiyun, sounding bewildered. "Why would Xuanyu be in trouble for falling over?"

"I broke, I broke -" Xuanyu whispered, and Jiang Lijie patted his arm.

"It's okay, Xuanyu," he said. "We can get another bow for A-Yuan, and, and one for you too, if you like! Chen-xiansheng makes them."

"May I see?" Wen Qing said, holding out her hand.

Hanging his head, Mo Xuanyu nodded, holding out the bow, and Wen Qing took it carefully, passing it to Jiang Aiyun.

"Be careful," she warned the girl. "It looks sharp, and like there might be splinters." Then, Wen Qing took Mo Xuanyu's shaking wrist and looked at his palm. There was a jagged red scrape across it, weeping a few drops of blood, and there were several impressive splinters sticking out of the wound, but it wasn't anything to worry about. "Come with me, Mo-gongzi. We'll get those splinters out."

"Qing-jiejie is a doctor," said A-Yuan sagely, patting Mo Xuanyu's arm. He looked utterly unperturbed by the loss of his new toy bow, seemingly concerned only by the older boy's

reaction. “She can get splinters out with needles without it even hurting!”

“I’m, I’m not in trouble?” Mo Xuanyu whispered, looking confused, and Wen Qing used a gentle smile to hide the urge to fly to Mo village herself and shove her sword down the throat of whoever had scared the child so badly.

“Not even a little trouble,” she promised. “We just need to get those splinters out of your hands. Okay? We’ll be right back.”

Mo Xuanyu hesitated, but then nodded, allowing Wen Qing to steer him away. They walked in silence towards her room, until the boy said in a small voice, “I really am sorry about the bow.”

“I know,” Wen Qing assured him, smiling down. “And I am really not angry. No one is, not even A-Yuan.”

Biting at his lip, Mo Xuanyu nodded, looking down at his feet again. They made it to the room Wen Qing had been given, and she sat him down on the daybed. He stayed still as she fetched an ointment and some clean cloths, and she knelt down by the bed, reaching for his hand. It was trembling just a little when she took it, but Wen Qing made sure to keep her touch gentle as she cleaned the scrape, taking care not to agitate the splinters. She would clean it again when they were out, just to be safe, but getting rid of the smeared, sticky blood would likely help the boy calm down.

He watched her closely while she worked, his sleet grey eyes alert and clever, and uncannily similar to Wei Wuxian’s.

“I’m going to get the splinters out now,” she said. “The needles look scarier than they really are, I promise.”

Mo Xuanyu nodded quickly, and then returned to being very still, not even flinching as she drew a needle from her sleeve. He winced slightly as she eased out a couple of the deeper splinters, but he made no sound, and didn’t try to pull away once. She smiled.

“You know, you are a much easier patient than Wei Wuxian,” she said, easing out the final splinter and dabbing a little more ointment onto the wound. “The moment I draw out the needles he pouts and moans like a little baby.” Mo Xuanyu gave a shy smile, and Wen Qing nodded at his legs. “I’m going to dab a little of this on your knees too. Roll up your trousers.”

The boy obeyed, and Wen Qing froze. Sure enough, the fall had taken most of the skin from his knees, but that wasn’t what had taken her attention. The entirety of his right leg was mottled with bruises, green and fading, older than the bruise on his face, but the extent of them – she could barely see a patch of pale skin at all.

“Mo Xuanyu,” she said, her voice low and trembling. “Who did this?”

“W-what?”

She looked up, taking his chin and making him meet her eyes. “Who did that, to you leg?”



“My cousin,” he muttered defeatedly. “He’s younger but, but he’s bigger than me, and he said – he said I’d broken his toy soldier’s leg so he should break mine, and – and A-Niang found us before he broke it so I’m, I’m alright, but A-Niang and Yima got into a big fight about it. I didn’t, though. Break his soldier. I *didn’t*.”

“I believe you,” said Wen Qing, and he blinked at her in surprise. She wondered who, other than his mother, had ever said such a thing to him before. She wanted to keep pushing, to demand who else had hurt him, to take names to give to Wei Wuxian when she could, but sixteen years from now this boy had destroyed every part of himself in search of vengeance, and that wasn’t something she wanted to encourage. So, she took his hands instead, looking at him. “Listen to me, now, Mo-gongzi. Here, with us, you are safe.” She ignored the part of herself that whispered ‘hypocrite’ at that – it was different. Mo Xuanyu was a child, and not a Wen, and had been declared as having the protection of the Jiang under his own name. “No one will beat you like that, ever again. The Jiang will look after you – Wei Wuxian will look after you. I will look after you, too. We will protect you.”

Mo Xuanyu smiled shyly. “Thank you, Wen-guniang.”

She smiled back, and then released his hands to clean the scrapes on his knees. She knew it was unlikely that he fully believed her, or that he truly understood that this was a home where he wouldn’t be struck in the face or beaten black and blue as a punishment. That would take time, and more reassurance than Wen Qing could offer herself. She had no idea how long she would be here herself, after all. But Wen Qing was a doctor, and her duty was to heal. Whatever she could do for this boy, she would.

Suddenly, Mo Xuanyu’s eyes widened, fixing on something behind her, and he cringed back. “Wen-guniang!”

She whipped around, just in time to see a man in a strange, blue mask throw out a talisman. It struck her chest before she could dodge, and at once all strength and feeling bled out of her limbs, and she crumpled to the ground. Fear surged through her, chased by anger and a deep sense of injustice, but even her heart seemed struck by the spell, beating slowly and dully in her chest when it should be racing. She could not move, or make a sound – she could not even blink, and the man loomed over her –

And Mo Xuanyu *screamed*, loud and high and desperate, scrambling off of the bed, and Wen Qing thought *good*, and *run!*

But the man in the mask reached out, seizing the boy by the ponytail and wrenching him back, and Wen Qing’s fury screamed silently within her. Mo Xuanyu was far from silent, shrieking and wailing and flailing his limbs, but then the man pulled out another talisman and hit him with it, and at once the boy fell limp in his arms.

Wen Qing could hear footsteps thundering towards them, but then out of the corner of her eye she saw a green glow, and her heart sunk deep with dread.

A portal talisman.

*No.*

The man reached down, lifting Wen Qing from the ground and hoisting her over his shoulder as though she was nothing more than a sack of radishes. She could see Mo Xuanyu hanging from the man's other arm, still as death, his eyes swimming with terror.

*No!*

Someone shouted, and she felt energy spin around her as the talisman activated –

And then she heard the sound of a blade hitting flesh, and a startled grunt –

And then she was pulled through a blaze of green light into a black nothing, and she knew no more.

### Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed this chapter, please do let me know what you think! I adore reading your comments! Until next time, please do take care.

## Chapter 26

### Chapter Notes

Thank you for all your lovely comments, and Happy New Year! I hope you enjoy this chapter!

Quick note on the Chinese in this chapter, at one point Mo Xuanyu references that Yanli told him to call her Saozi which means 'wife of my older brother.'

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Personally, Nie Huaisang thought it was very unfair that he and Jiang-xiong had been sent in opposite directions. Yesterday, Jiang Cheng had said he would tell him something that – from the look on the other man's face – promised to be very amusing, and also to be related to silencing talismans. Of course, then they had told a horrible, world-shattering story and sent Huaisang tumbling into full panic mode, but now that Wei-xiong had shown up he couldn't help but think about it again.

Because it *looked* very much like Wei-xiong and Lan Wangji had finally got their shit together, and the fact that there was a story related to it that involved silencing talismans and Jiang Cheng smirking promised to be utterly fantastic. He couldn't be sure, of course, that Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji weren't still utterly oblivious to the other's feelings. Wei-xiong had always been free with physical affection, and his putting a hand on Hanguang Jun's wrist would not be noteworthy – if Lan Wangji hadn't squeezed his hand back. They'd looked each other in the eye, too, properly, sappily, the way all the poets described lovers looking, and stood very close to each other, and really it was very, very unfair that Huaisang wasn't allowed to squeal or gush about it, or at least laugh about it with Jiang-xiong.

Instead, he was stuck marching through Lanling with Lan Wangji and Jin Zixuan. Asking Lan Wangji was out of the question – even if such a question wouldn't win Huaisang deadly glare on a normal day, right now Lan Wangji's da-ge had been missing for nearly three days. Huaisang was nosy, but he wasn't cruel. He could, perhaps, have asked Jin Zixuan, if there was a chance of speaking outside of Lan Wangji's earshot, but that would likely be just as awkward – he'd never really had much to do with Jin Zixuan. Besides, there was no way of leaving Lan Wangji's earshot. So, there was no way for Huaisang to distract himself from his fear for Xichen-ge except for his daydreams.

At least he had eaten now, enough that his head had stopped spinning and his heart had steadied. He felt better for sleeping, too, though no less annoyed at himself for the weakness. They had flown back to the city, and Huaisang *had* been able to keep up, but in truth the distance wasn't far. The tunnels twisted and turned and overlapped so much that the hours they'd spent walking through them had barely taken them ten miles out of the city.

So far, their backtracking felt pointless. No one had heard of Su Guozhi outside of the Su disciples, and a couple of members of smaller clans who claimed to have spoken to him once or twice. According to them, Su Guozhi was a skilled swordsman, a noble man, and close to Su-zongzhu's inner circle – nothing they couldn't have figured out on their own. They had to have spoken to fifty or sixty people by now, and none of them were useful. They had also been moving quickly, trusting Jin Zixuan to help them avoid his father. It wasn't that they couldn't handle a confrontation with him, simply that they would prefer not to have one.

Or so Huaisang assumed, at least. With Jin Zixuan and Lan Wangji little was said aloud, and many sentences trailed off to be ended with nods of understanding or slight shakes of the head. For the most part, Nie Huaisang thought himself rather good at reading people, but now more than ever he knew that he could be wrong.

It was getting difficult to pretend that didn't hurt so badly. Instead, he tried to focus on his stomach, which was just about telling him that it was time for lunch when Jin Zixuan led them to a small set of rooms close to – but not quite within – the most central part of Jinlintai. He paused at the door, his face twisted in discomfort.

"These are A – Jin Guangyao's rooms. I doubt there'll be anything in here, but it's worth a look."

Nie Huaisang nodded, and Lan Wangji voiced his agreement by striding past them both and pushing open the door. Fanning himself gently, Huaisang raised an eyebrow at Jin Zixuan and followed, peering around the room.

Compared to the obnoxious wealth of the rest of Jinlintai, it looked very bare. There were few ornaments, little in the way of personal affects. It was almost Lan-like, something that now sent a shiver down Huaisang's spine. When Meng Yao lived in Qinghe, his rooms hadn't been that full either, but there had been more personal touches there than there were here. A couple of paintings, an incense burner that Huaisang had bought him, a vast selection of books gifted by Da-ge. Here, there was none of that. In fact...

"There are no books here at all," he said aloud, earning a confused look from Jin Zixuan, though Lan Wangji continued rifling through drawers without pausing.

"There are a couple," Jin Zixuan said slowly, nodding towards the bedstand, but Huaisang shook his head.

"Yes but, they're light reading, bedtime reading – but Meng Yao is constantly reading, he's always trying to learn something or other... And he doesn't tend to throw away books. He doesn't care about things, but books are different. So, if there are no books here, that means he's keeping his books somewhere else."

Lan Wangji stiffened, turning away from the shelves he had been investigating. "Such as a library or an office. Has he been given a room to work in?"

Jin Zixuan frowned, shaking his head slightly. "I don't know. Fu – Jin-zongzhu and Jin Guangyao never spoke of work around me. But I can find out. Stay here."

He ducked out of the room, and Lan Wangji pursed his lips, staring after him for a moment before returning to the shelves. For once caring about whether it looked like he was standing around doing nothing, Huaisang ducked down to peer under the bed. He wasn't expecting to find anything, but there was a small box there, old and worn, and he frowned, pulling it towards him.

There was a small lock on it, but a cheap one, and Huaisang knocked it off with a quick talisman. He held his breath and eased open the box. His heart plummeted down like a stone into his stomach, and he winced slightly. There was nothing useful in the box. No evidence, or clues. Just an old, faded straw doll, and some scraps of old paper, and a woman's broach. The doll's face had utterly worn away, and the words on the feathering paper were in two hands - one large, and clear, the other clearly a child's. They were words written to help a child learn to read and write.

*I am Meng Yao. I am five years old. My mama loves me.*

The other slips were much the same, and Huaisang gritted his teeth, turning the broach over in his fingers. It wasn't expensive, but it was carefully polished, and scratched into the back was the name *Meng Shi*.

"What is it?" asked Lan Wangji, and Huaisang cleared his throat, shaking his head and throwing the box down onto the bed.

"Nothing," he muttered, and Lan Wangji stared at him. "Keepsakes. His mother's."

Lan Wangji stiffened again, an expression Huaisang couldn't quite read flickering over his face. Then he blinked, his face shifting back into cool determination.

"Keep looking."

Huaisang nodded, waving his fan a little faster to hide the shaking of his hands. It didn't matter how miserable Meng Yao's childhood had been, how alone he had felt his whole life. He couldn't let himself feel sorry for Meng Yao, not now, not ever again.

A moment later, Jin Zixuan came back in. "There's a study, near the dungeons. The servants aren't allowed inside to clean, but they know where it is."

"He's too smart to leave anything incriminating in his bedroom," Huaisang said, looking at Wangji. "The study is a better bet."

Lan Wangji nodded once, and they went. The locks on the study door were significantly more complex than the one on the box of keepsakes – there were two iron keyholes, and then two more talisman locks. For a moment, Huaisang wasn't sure whether they would be able to get in, but Jin Zixuan narrowed his eyes at the highest talisman, and gave a scoff of disgust.

"This is an override. My father's blood will open all the locks. He's never trusted Jin Guangyao – he probably didn't like the idea of a room in Jinlintai he could get into." With that, Jin Zixuan drew out a blade and pricked his thumb, pressing it against the top talisman.

There was a strange hissing sound, like steam hitting snow, and the handle of the door shifted. The door opened.

They entered a little more carefully, but if there were any traps there they didn't go off. There were no windows in the study, and even when the lights were lit it seemed a little dark to Huaisang. Shelves lined the walls, all full of books, save for the westernmost wall. There, the shelves were full of small boxes, and many compartments were surrounded by cloth covered in suppression talismans.

Jin Zixuan swore under his breath. He was standing by one of the bookcases, his face pale. "These are all on demonic cultivation. All of them." He drew one off the shelf, rifling through the pages, and his skin took on a strange green tint. "God... this is..."

Nie Huaisang peeked over his shoulder, and immediately regretted it. The page Zixuan had open bore a horribly graphic diagram of a man being cut apart, complete with a look of utter agony on his face, and instructions on how to ensure the tortured soul would retain all possible resentment.

"Where – where could they even come from?" Jin Zixuan murmured.

"Wen Ruohan," said Lan Wangji coldly. He was looking through one of the boxes on the far shelves, and his jaw was tighter than Huaisang had ever seen it. "The Stygian Tiger Amulet."

"What?" Huaisang squeaked, Jin Zixuan echoing the word beside him, and Lan Wangji held the box towards them. Hands trembling, Huaisang took it and peered inside. Sure enough, the papers were full of sketches and notes in two hands – one Jin Guangyao's neat calligraphy, and another Huaisang didn't recognise. They were all, unmistakably, plans to reverse engineer an amulet of his own. Jin Zixuan made a strangled noise beside him.

"That's – that's my father's hand," he choked, pointing at the writing Huaisang didn't recognise. "He – he must have ordered..."

"We knew he would do this," said Lan Wangji, an edge almost like impatience in his voice. "Sizhui told us Jin Guangyao and Xue Yang recreated the amulet. It makes sense he was already attempting to do so now. We already knew Jin Guangshan wanted the amulet himself. It is just proof of what we know already."

Huaisang felt a little dizzy, but Jin Zixuan nodded grimly, closing the box and stowing it in his sleeve. "It is proof," he agreed. "Proof we can use later. For now, we'll keep looking."

Lan Wangji had already turned to the next box on the shelf, and though what he wanted to do was hide behind his fan, Huaisang tucked it into his belt instead, reaching for another box.

They were meticulous, the notes inside, and utterly useless. For the most part, Huaisang found drafts of political proposals or official announcements, or dictations of conversations between high-ranking members of the gentry. Some were downright scandalous, but he couldn't enjoy them – not when they were the last thing he was looking for. The next box was much the same, and the one after it, and his foot began tapping rapidly on the floor, impatience clawing at him.

“There’s nothing about Qiongqi Pass,” Jin Zixuan said, a note of frustration in his voice. “Nothing about the camps, or Zixun’s ambush...”

“He wouldn’t have written any of that down,” said Huaisang, thumbing through a selection of secrets about Ouyang-zongzhu that he would mentally stow away for later. “Or if he did, he would have burnt the papers. Too much risk if they’re found, and no benefit at all to keeping them.”

Jin Zixuan pursed his lips, flicking through what looked like a logbook. “It just seems a lot to remember...”

“He has an eidetic memory,” said Huaisang bitterly. “And he never forgets anything.”

*Except, of course, the fact that certain people loved him and cared for him and would have continued to do so forever if he hadn’t murdered their brothers.*

Between the three of them, it took nearly an hour to tear the room apart, to scan all of the letters and plans and notes, and though there were a couple of bits and pieces they were able to squirrel away for evidence later, they found nothing to help them now. Nothing. No addresses, or names, or contingency plans.

The frustration had reached a point where Huaisang very much wanted to cry when there was a knock at the door, and they looked up to see a Jin disciple at the door.

“What is it?” Jin Zixuan asked at once, and the disciple bowed.

“Gongzi, Jiang Jianyu is at the door of Jinlintai, with several more cultivators. They were searching for Jiang-zongzhu, but when I said that he had not returned from the woods with you they asked to speak with you. Jiang Jianyu insists it is an emergency.”

“Another one?” Huaisang asked weakly, but Jin Zixuan and Lan Wangji were already moving, and he hurried along after them, stowing another couple of books in his Qiankun sleeve before shutting and locking the door behind him.

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They had found nothing. Absolutely nothing.

Just over an hour ago, Nie Mingjue had found a blood trail, but all it had led to was the half-eaten corpse of a deer. It was the only thing they had found that could even half count as a clue – Jiang Cheng almost wished for more dead ends. At least they could feel, for a moment, that they were actually doing something useful.

They were searching in silence, now. For a while, Jinling and Zizhen had talked quietly together, but the stony silence of Nie Mingjue and Lan Qiren was infectious, and it had been an hour since anyone spoke. Still, Jiang Cheng noticed that the two boys stayed close together, and close to him, too. Rather, Jinling stayed close to him, and Zizhen did too, by proxy.

Jiang Cheng had wondered a little about Zizhen as they wandered the tunnels below the city. A son of Ouyang-zongzhu who was genuinely honoured to be offered the use of the name ‘Wei,’ a boy raised to believe in the evil of the Yiling Patriarch who had put his assumptions aside in order to trust the evidence of his own eyes and ears and heart. A boy who had been dragged through time and trauma because of politics that had nothing to do with him, a boy who could stand in front of his father and pretend that they were strangers.

A boy who would put his body between Wei Wuxian and a hundred archers.

It was the last part, more than anything else, that made Jiang Cheng resolute in his determination to keep Zizhen safe. It was, after all, his job as an uncle.

Three nights ago, he gone to sleep with a single infant nephew, secure in the knowledge that he had time to find his footing in the new role of uncle. He had woken up not with one nephew, but with six.

The conclusion was a careful one, and it had taken him until now to be fully certain of it, but he thought it a rather safe bet that it was the truth. Most obviously, besides Rulan, he also had A-Yuan (and if A-Yuan preferred Lan Wangji to him right now it was only because he was a baby who didn’t know any better, and Jiang Cheng had not yet had the opportunity to bribe the child with toys.)

Both Rulan and A-Yuan now had teenage counterparts, which made four, and it looked very much like Sizhui and Jingyi came as a package deal. Even if they hadn’t before, it would be very rude to consider Sizhui his nephew but deny his ‘twin.’ And then there was Zizhen, who Wei Wuxian had already half adopted. Jiang Cheng was sure his brother wouldn’t put it that way, but he’d given the boy his name, for god’s sake, not to mention his sword. He hadn’t taken Suibian back when they met in the forest, and Jiang Cheng hadn’t missed it. Accepting Zizhen as a nephew now really just seemed sensible when Wei Wuxian was inevitably going to drag him into the family.

Rightfully so, in Jiang Cheng’s opinion – assuming the boy wanted to be involved in the chaos that came with it.

Of course, Jiang Cheng had no idea how to be an uncle. With Rulan, all he’d had to do so far was give cuddles and make funny faces. That wouldn’t go down so well with teenagers, particularly the ones that weren’t technically his real nephews (yet.) However, given that they *were* teenagers, that made the age difference more like that between brothers, and Jiang Cheng didn’t exactly have experience *being* a big brother, but he did have experience *dealing* with a big brother, and so emulating Wei Wuxian’s less annoying behaviour was, he supposed, the safest bet for now.

In this moment, that meant keeping an eye on Jinling and Zizhen, and making sure that they were safe. So, Jiang Cheng was paying attention when a golden spiritual butterfly fluttered before Jinling’s face, and his nephew’s eyes flickered closed. Jiang Cheng paused, watching with a growing sense of dread as Jinling’s lips parted, his eyebrows drawing low into a frown. Then, his fist clenched, and his eyes opened wide, searching for Jiang Cheng.

“Jiujiu –”



“What is it?” Jiang Cheng demanded, as Nie Mingjue and Lan Qiren turned to face them.

“A-Die – he said something’s wrong, to fall back to Wei Wuxian – he said – he said it’s an emergency!”

Ice splintered through every one of Jiang Cheng’s veins and he leapt forward, grabbing Suibian out of its sheath before shoving it into Zizhen’s hands, throwing Sandu beneath himself in the same motion.

“Keep up!” he yelled at the two boys, but he needn’t have bothered – Jinling and Zizhen were already flying at his side, their faces tight with worry. Jiang Cheng wasn’t sure whether Lan Qiren and Nie Mingjue would follow, and he didn’t care.

There was an emergency, and they had to fall back to Wei Wuxian and – and Wei Wuxian hadn’t used the talismans, Jiang Cheng hadn’t felt him use the talismans, if it was too *late* –

The wind lashed against his face like the whip of the Wen, but Jiang Cheng could only try to go faster, to erase the miles they’d walked in seconds, to find his brother –

It was minutes, the flight, minutes, but every one was agonising, and his heart pounded desperately in his chest, and –

Wei Wuxian was right where they’d left him, Jingyi and Sizhui sitting at his sides.

All three looked up in surprise as they drew nearer, and Wei Wuxian’s eyes immediately widened.

“Jiang Cheng!” he cried, leaping to his feet. “What’s wrong?”

“I – I don’t – know-” Jiang Cheng tried to catch his breath. “You – okay?”

“I’m fine,” Wei Wuxian said, worry tight in his voice as he clutched Jiang Cheng’s arm. “We’re fine, why wouldn’t we –”

“Wei Ying...”

Jiang Cheng’s head jerked up as Lan Wangji swept over on his sword, Nie Huaisang on one side and Zixuan on the other, and behind him – Jiang Cheng’s heart sank.

Behind him was Jiang Jianyu, and two more of his disciples, and they all looked stricken.

The colour drained from Wei Wuxian’s face, and his grip on Jiang Cheng’s arm grew painful. Lan Wangji walked to Wei Wuxian’s other side, taking his hand, and dread filled his brother’s eyes.

“What happened?” Wei Wuxian demanded, his voice steadier than Jiang Cheng would have expected, but still tight with fear.

“Zongzhu, Da-shixiong,” Jianyu said, bowing low before them – too low. “I’m sorry. Someone broke into Lotus Pier this morning, and Wen Qing and Mo Xuanyu – Zongzhu, we

failed to protect them, and they were abducted. I am sorry.”

“Abducted?” Jiang Cheng demanded, fear beating at his chest as his brother’s face fell to horror and fury. “What do you mean abducted – how could that happen? They were to be protected!”

“I know, Zongzhu,” said Jianyu, bowing lower, and Jiang Cheng couldn’t believe this was actually happening – “I do not know how he entered Lotus Pier, only that there were so many new faces around it is possible he was assumed to be another visitor – I do not know how he reached the central part of Lotus Pier, nor who he is. They were in Wen-guniang’s rooms, dealing with a splinter and – I heard the boy screaming as I passed. I entered the room, and saw a man in a mask with Wen-guniang over his shoulder, and Mo Xuanyu under his arm. He’d already activated a portal talisman – I threw a knife, and it struck, but I was too late. They... they vanished. I’m sorry.”

Biting down his panic, Jiang Cheng said, “The rest of the Wen?”

“Da-shijie has Lotus Pier in lockdown, Zongzhu,” Jianyu said. “Each room of the Wen have been assigned cultivators to keep them safe, and A-Yuan, his grandmother and Wen Ning are in the sanctuary hall, with Da-shijie herself.”

The faintest slither of Jiang Cheng’s tension eased away at that, and he nodded. It had been one of the first things he had insisted on when they re-built Lotus Pier, the memory of the bodies of all his shidi and shimei still fresh in his mind. They would never be surprised like that again – they would be prepared for any attack that might come. Should an attack come, all those unable to fight were to be escorted to the sanctuary hall, a heavily warded room in the heart of Lotus Pier that was more often used for dancing or practising sword forms. A-Yuan and A-Jie and Rulan were in the safest part of Lotus Pier – the rest of the Wen were protected.

Beside him, Wei Wuxian was trembling, and Jiang Cheng could see curls of dark smoke coil from Chenqing, though it was still stowed in his brother’s belt.

“Wei Ying –” Lan Wangji began, and Wei Wuxian looked at him sharply, his face twisted in anger and fear and guilt.

“I told you,” he choked, “I told you I shouldn’t – I shouldn’t have let them leave the Burial Mounds, I should’ve – we should’ve stayed *there*, we would have been safe, she – she – And Mo Xuanyu, he’s – he’s just a kid, he –” he looked at Jiang Cheng. To his horror, his brother’s eyes were watering. “Why is it that everyone I try to protect ends up worse than they ever were before?”

A lump rose in Jiang Cheng’s throat, and he opened his mouth to stammer some argument or rebuttal, but he didn’t know what to say.

“We didn’t, Xian-gege,” said Sizhui quietly, and Wei Wuxian gave a strangled laugh.

“You’re here!” he cried. “In the middle of all of this!”

“I don’t think I’d say that’s worse than we were before,” mumbled Jinling, looking at his father, and Wei Wuxian closed his eyes again. “Okay – okay – okay – think,” he said, breathing heavily. “The man – the mask – what did it look like?”

“And stand up,” Jiang Cheng added, before Jianyu could speak.

With a nod of his head, Jianyu rose. “It was blue, and shaped like a ghost.”

“Su She,” Jingyi growled. “It’s got to be. You said you stabbed him? Was it fatal?”

Jianyu shook his head slightly. “I fear not – I couldn’t aim directly for his heart with the way he carried Wen-guniang and Mo Xuanyu. The blade struck low.” He paused, pulling something out of his sleeve.

“Da-shixiong, Da-shijie said she did not know, but that maybe you could use this.” He passed over a small bag. “The blood on the cloth inside is the masked man’s.”

“Use it?” said Nie Mingjue suspiciously, and Jiang Cheng jumped slightly. He hadn’t realised that Nie Mingjue and Lan Qiren had actually followed after all, though he supposed they were hardly abandoning a useful trail. “I know only of dark curses that make use of a person’s blood.”

“Su She deserves every dark curse known to man,” Jinling said coldly, crossing his arms over his chest, and Zizhen and Jingyi nodded their agreement. Sizhui moved closer to Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji.

“Wait!” Nie Huaisang cried, fumbling with his sleeve. “There’s – there’s a spell, Wei-xiong – it’s not quite a tracking spell but if we tweaked it...” He hurried over to Wei Wuxian’s side, holding open an old, tattered book and thumbing through it. “If we have his blood, and we substitute it for – here!” He pointed excitedly at a complex spell that Jiang Cheng recognised immediately as demonic cultivation, and he cringed, but Wei Wuxian’s eyes widened, and he took the book from Huaisang’s hands.

“Where did you find this?” he murmured.

“Where *did* you find that?” Nie Mingjue growled, and Huaisang sent a wounded look his brother’s way.

“Jin Guangyao’s study,” he said, wincing. “We found proof that he’s trying to make another amulet for Jin Guangshan, and a whole lot of books on demonic cultivation, but nothing else that’s particularly useful.”

“This might work...” Wei Wuxian said, frowning heavily. “It’s... it *might* work...” Worry filled his eyes, and he looked up. “Lan Zhan-”

“It is likely that Wen Qing has been taken to the same place as Xiongzhong,” said Lan Wangji. “If this is a way to track who took her, it is not turning away from the other search.”

“Do you think that it’s a good idea?” said Nie Mingjue sharply. “Using an untested, altered method of demonic cultivation to track them down? What about what you were trying to do

before?”

“I have somewhere to start here,” Wei Wuxian replied. He was pale, far too pale, and breathing too quickly. “There’s only one reason I can think of for Jin Guangyao to take Wen Qing and if I’m right –”

Lan Qiren frowned. “What reason?”

Wei Wuxian flinched, looking at Jiang Cheng, and just for a second, his eyes flickered down towards Jiang Cheng’s abdomen.

And Jiang Cheng’s heart went cold, and Lan Wangji made a strange, strangled sound.

“Who – *xiongzhang*’s?” he choked, and Wei Wuxian shook his head, looking at Lan Wangji with eyes so pained and afraid Jiang Cheng wanted to scream.

“I don’t know – maybe. Maybe his past self, maybe someone else, but –”

“What are you talking about?” Nie Mingjue demanded, as Lan Qiren said a sharp, “Wangji –”

“Jin Guangyao has no golden core,” said Wei Wuxian hollowly. “If I’m right, he thinks that Wen Qing can perform a transplant, give him someone else’s.”

Sizhui choked, grabbing onto Jingyi, who had turned stark white. Lan Wangji was even whiter, his eyes wider than Jiang Cheng had ever seen them.

“Why would he think that?” Lan Qiren asked sharply, and Jiang Cheng’s breath caught in his throat.

“It doesn’t matter,” said Nie Huaisang suddenly. He was clutching his brother’s sleeve again, and his voice trembled a little, but his eyes were like steel as they fixed on Wei Wuxian. “If that’s what he thinks, that’s what he thinks. And if that’s what he thinks he’ll make her do it, or try to, which means we need to move fast. And it’s easier to alter an array that already exists than it is create a talisman from scratch. So, Wei-xiong, how can we help?”

---

Mo Xuanyu had never been so scared in all his life.

One moment ago, just one, he had been in Lotus Pier, and now he very much wasn’t – now he was in what could only be described as a dungeon, dangling over the arm of a stranger who wore the face of a ghost, and he couldn’t move at all. He wanted to flail free and scream and cry, but he could hardly even blink, and he felt tears sting at his eyes.

With a hiss of pain, the stranger put him down on the floor, dropping Wen-guniang down beside him, and out of the corner of his eye Mo Xuanyu saw another man rush over.

“Minshan!” the new man said, the edge of his golden robes whipping past Xuanyu’s vision. “What happened?” There was a pause. “That is not the Wen child.”

“No,” grunted the stranger, Minshan. “But she said that she would protect him, and then he made a great deal of noise and drew the Jiang’s attention so he would have to do – this is his fault!”

Mo Xuanyu wanted to curl up into a little ball, but his arms and his legs wouldn’t listen to him. He was used to things being his fault, but this wasn’t his fault, it *wasn’t*, he hadn’t done anything wrong.

“Let me see that,” the new man muttered, and they moved out of Xuanyu’s sight. He could see Wen-guniang in front of him, lying very still, and her eyes were closed, and she didn’t move at all. Not even a little.

After a few minutes, the man called Minshan breathed out in what sounded like relief.

“There,” said the new man. “You will recover, Minshan.”

“Thank you, Jin-gongzi.”

Jin-gongzi? Was the new man related to Mo Xuanyu’s father?

Suddenly, Xuanyu felt very cold. Jiang Yanli said that his brother would be excited to meet him – this wasn’t what she meant, was it? She wouldn’t, she wouldn’t – she’d said to call her Saozi, like Jin Zixuan was his real brother and he was really part of her family, she, she was so nice, she wouldn’t –

Would she?

“You’re welcome.” Jin-gongzi sighed. “A Jiang disciple isn’t exactly what I had in mind, but-” The man’s voice cut off as he moved into Xuanyu’s line of vision. Mo Xuanyu had been expecting a twisted sort of villain like he’d seen pictures of, but the man in front of him wasn’t that. He was short, and he had a friendly face, his eyes wide with surprise. Somehow, the friendly face was scarier than anything he could have imagined. “Mo Xuanyu... What – well. That is a surprise.” He paused, crouching down to grab Xuanyu’s chin and make him meet his eye. “Listen now, little Mo – there is no one here to hear you if you scream, so there’s no point in making any noise. If you do as we say, we will have no need to hurt you – but if you make a fuss, or disobey, then Su-zongzhu may lose his temper. You did get him stabbed, after all. It wouldn’t surprise me if he has a short fuse right now. I am going to take this talisman off now, and you are going to answer my questions. Understand?”

Mo Xuanyu did understand, but he had no way of showing it. Jin-gongzi smiled at him, and slowly pulled the talisman off his chest, crumpling it in his hand. After a few moments, Xuanyu felt a weird tingling in his toes and his fingers, and then his arms and legs and chest, like his whole body had fallen to sleep. He gave a choked little gasp, blinking in surprise, and then he swallowed, looking at Jin-gongzi.

“You are Mo Xuanyu, aren’t you?” the man said, and Mo Xuanyu nodded shakily. “What were you doing at Lotus Pier?”

Mo Xuanyu felt his lower lip tremble. “I-” His throat hurt, his voice coming out a little strangled. “Th-the Yiling Patriarch c-came and got me and m-my A-Niang, and – and he said he’d h-heard about m-my father not, not treating me and A-Niang right and – and he wanted to k-keep us safe, safe...”

“When?”

“Yesterday,” Mo Xuanyu whispered. Jin-gongzi paused for a moment, and Xuanyu took a deep breath. “Gongzi... Gongzi please... please let me go home. I won’t, I won’t tell anyone, please let me go.”

Jin-gongzi smiled, and it looked so friendly that it made Xuanyu’s stomach curl. “I already told you, Xuanyu. I won’t hurt you, if you do exactly as you’re told.”

“Gongzi, you know this boy?” asked Su Minshan, and Jin-gongzi gave a soft laugh.

“Of course I do. This is my brother.”

Xuanyu couldn’t help but cringe away. “Are – are you Jin Zixuan?”

Jin-gongzi laughed again, this time higher and more bitter. “No, Xuanyu. I am Jin Guangyao.”

“Jin Guangyao?” Xuanyu echoed, and Jin-gongzi’s lip curled into a smirk.

“Yes.” Jin Guangyao tilted his head to the side slightly, narrowing his eyes. “Wen-guniang said she will protect you... So, I suppose you will do.”

“Please,” Xuanyu whimpered. “Please, let me go.”

“Don’t worry, Xuanyu. You are nobody. If you do as I say, and Wen-guniang does as I say, soon you can go home, unharmed. I have no reason to hurt you this time. Your mother is nobody. You are nobody. The only reason Wei Wuxian would take you to Lotus Pier is to stop you from becoming what you were before.”

Mo Xuanyu had never been more confused in his life, or more frightened. “This time?” Did that mean there would be a next time?

Jin Guangyao just smiled, patting Mo Xuanyu on the head. “Indeed. Maybe this time, if you’re good, and remember that you are nobody, and that you deserve *nothing*, you won’t have to die at all.”

*I don’t understand*, Xuanyu thought tearfully, but he was too afraid to say it aloud. Instead, all that came out of his mouth was a single word, “Please...”

Jin Guangyao stood up and rolled his neck. “Well, I do think it’s time to wake Wen-guniang up. Minshan.”

Mo Xuanyu looked to the side quickly, getting his first look at Su Minshan’s face behind the mask, but it was only for a second, because then the man was behind him, and his arm was

tight around Xuanyu's chest and in his other hand he had a knife.

"No, *no*, please," Xuanyu cried, and Jin Guangyao put a finger to his lips.

"Shh. You will be fine – just be quiet."

Jin Guangyao waved his hand, and another man walked over. He looked like a guard to Xuanyu, and he pulled Wen-guniang's hands behind her back, encasing them in shackles. There was a chain connected to them, and the guard locked it to the wall, and then pulled away a talisman from Wen-guniang's chest.

After a few moments, she stirred, her face twisting in confusion, and then she gave a sharp gasp. Her eyes narrowed at once, even as she fumbled to sit up.

"Jin Guangyao," she said, her voice rasping slightly. Then her eyes flickered to Xuanyu, and they widened again. "What are you doing?"

"Simply ensuring your cooperation," Jin Guangyao said smoothly. "Su Minshan informs me you were keen to protect Xiao-Xuanyu. Apparently, Wen Yuan was unavailable. Wen-guniang, I am aware that you transplanted Wei Wuxian's golden core into Jiang Wanyin. You are going to do the same for me."

"Oh?" said Wen-guniang, her voice like steel. "And who is to be the donor? Are you aware that they have to give consent? You cannot steal a golden core, Jin-gongzi."

Jin Guangyao's eyes narrowed. "Give consent?"

Wen-guniang nodded. "The donor must be awake, alert, conscious, and *willing*, for the entire duration of the procedure. Otherwise the golden core would dissipate, and it would all be worthless."

"Is that so?" said Jin Guangyao quietly. "Alright... Well, I shall go and fine tune the details, Wen-guniang, don't you worry about that. For now, I'll let you two settle in."

"This is a bad idea, Jin Guangyao. Wei Wuxian will not be pleased – if you let us go now, perhaps he might be convinced to spare your life," said Wen-guniang dangerously, but Jin Guangyao did not seem to care.

"He would have to find me first," he said, stepping out through the cell door with a cold smile. Su Minshan let go of Xuanyu, and he tumbled to the ground, scrambling as far away from the man as possible and pressing himself against the wall as Su Minshan walked out of the cell, too. "Don't worry, Wen-guniang. They can't find us here."

The cell door slid shut, and then Jin Guangyao and Su Minshan and the other guard walked out of another door behind it, shutting it after them.

"Mo-gongzi, are you hurt?" Wen-guniang asked quickly, and Xuanyu shook his head.

"What – what's happening?" he sobbed, and Wen-guniang shook her head.

“I’m not – I’m not sure, but I’m going to look after you, alright? As best I can, alright, it’s okay. Look at me,” she commanded, meeting his eye sombrely. “Listen to me now, alright? Wei Wuxian is going to come and find us, alright? Both of us, okay? You’re going to be fine.”

“He – he said if – if you b-behaved I – I’ll be o-okay but if, if, if you don’t, if – if you don’t –”

“Hush now,” Wen-guniang said gently. “I’ll do my best, alright? I promise. I meant what I said. You’ll be okay. Wei Wuxian will find us. You’ll see.”

But she sounded scared, and she looked like she was about to cry too, and Xuanyu sobbed, curling up against the wall and hugging his knees to his chest.

“I want my A-Niang,” he whimpered, and Wen-guniang swallowed, closing her eyes for a long moment. Then, she struggled to her feet, her hands still bound behind her back. She sat down beside him, putting herself between him and the door.

“It’s going to be alright,” she said, her voice trembling slightly. “You’re going to be okay. We’re... we’re going to – to be okay.” Xuanyu sobbed, slumping against her, and Wen-guniang shuddered. “We’re going to be okay.”

Mo Xuanyu didn’t think she believed that anymore than he did.

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading, I hope you enjoyed this chapter!



## Chapter 27

### Chapter Notes

And for once, I am miraculously on time! I think. Anyway, thank you for your lovely reviews, I hope you enjoy this chapter!

As a note on names, in this chapter Jin Guangyao refers to Xue Yang pretty much exclusively by his courtesy name (Xue Chengmei) Also, since he wasn't around for the 'Future Jin Guangyao is Jin Guanyao, Past is Meng Yao' convo, he just refers to his younger self as his younger self.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It was hopeless.

It was completely, and utterly, hopeless.

They had tried the ritual five different ways, had used almost every last piece of the blood-soaked cloth, and there was nothing. The taste of sulphur and ash filled his mouth, bitter and grim, and his hands trembled as he scratched another variation into the ground. He no longer knew who was there, who was watching or waiting or helping – there was just him, and the array and the dirt and his failure. There was blood beneath his nails, and the world was a little blurred before him, and he knew that this iteration of the spell wouldn't work either, but it didn't matter, it didn't, he had to try –

“Wei Wuxian...”

He gritted his teeth, biting back a sob and digging his nails deeper into the dirt. He had to concentrate, he had to try.

“Wei Ying, stop.” Lan Zhan's voice was so soft, so broken, and Wei Wuxian shook his head, but the array before him was blurring out of any recognisable shape, and the world was shaking like it was in the grips of an earthquake. “Please...”

He shook his head again, shoved his hand across his eyes to try and clear his tears, but then a pair of strong, warm arms wrapped around his chest, pulling him away from the array. “No,” he choked, straining against their hold, but the arms held firm. “No, I have – have to try, have to – have to –”

“Wei Ying, rest.”

“No...” His protest came out as more of a sob, and the arms around him shifted, so their owner could cradle him against their chest, against white robes that smelt of sandalwood, and he sobbed again. “I need – I need to find them, Lan Zhan, I – I need to –”

“Wei Wuxian, you can’t do anymore today,” said Jiang Cheng, from somewhere outside the blur of his vision. His voice was strained, worried, and Wei Wuxian looked for him, blinking back the tears until his brother came into view. He was pale, and he looked afraid, but he gave a half-hearted smile when Wei Wuxian met his eye. “You need to stop.”

“No, no, I need –”

*“Wei Wuxian, you need to rest,” said Wen Qing, but she was wrong, because Jiang Cheng looked like he was dying, and there was no way in hell he could rest.*

*“I need medical books.”*

Another sob broke from his aching throat, and he closed his eyes. Wen Qing – Wen Qing was gone, and Lan Xichen and Mo Xuanyu were gone, and there was nothing he could do to find them, because nothing *worked*, because he was useless and broken and a curse to all who met him and –

“I’m sorry,” he sobbed, burying his face in Lan Zhan’s chest. “I’m sorry, Lan Zhan, I’m sorry, I’m sorry.”

“No need to be sorry,” Lan Zhan murmured, though it sounded like every word pained him. He pressed his lips to Wei Wuxian’s hair. “Rest, Wei Ying. *Please.*”

He shouldn’t rest, he didn’t deserve to rest, he *shouldn’t*, but Lan Zhan was begging him, and his eyelids were heavier than lead, and he could have forced his body to keep going if he had the Stygian Tiger Amulet, if he could draw on its energy, but he couldn’t. It was gone, and he was coreless and empty and broken, and there was no strength in him to keep him from crying into Lan Zhan’s robes.

Slowly, the tears dragged him down into the darkness of broken dreams – images of his worst memories and deepest fears bleeding through his brain, flashing beneath his closed eyelids. Even unconscious, he could feel the discomforting resentful energy that still buzzed through his veins, fuelling his nightmares. It couldn’t be more than a few hours after he closed his eyes that they snapped open again, a gasp wrenching him back to reality and replacing the image of Wen Qing’s battered face with Lan Zhan’s mercifully unharmed one.

“Wei Ying,” Lan Zhan murmured, staring worriedly down at him. He was still cradling him, Wei Wuxian realised, his hand running over Wei Wuxian’s hair.

“Lan Zhan... did I wake you?”

Lan Zhan shook his head. “It is after five,” he said softly. “But still early. Sleep, Wei Ying.”

Wei Wuxian shuddered, shaking his head and struggling to sit up. With a concerned frown, Lan Zhan helped him up, but he didn’t let go, keeping one arm wrapped tightly around Wei Wuxian’s back, keeping him close. It felt warm, and safe, and helped him stay upright as his exhausted limbs locked into place. His head was aching, and his mouth felt dry, but he was more aware of himself and his surroundings than he had been last night. He looked around and stiffened.

Most of their group were still asleep, but Lan Qiren, Nie Mingjue, and Jiang Cheng were all sitting up and looking his way, as though he had interrupted their conversation by waking. A strange feeling of discomfort twisted in his stomach – they had watched him fail until he was empty, seen him sob himself to sleep in Lan Zhan’s arms, heard every one of his broken apologies, and if the shame of that was not enough, they had also seen Lan Zhan comforting him. They would have seen Lan Zhan whisper into his hair, seen how close he held him, and he knew that Lan Zhan didn’t want to tell anyone they were courting until they found Xichen.

Guilt flooded every part of him, blending in with his shame. It was enough to make a fool out of himself, but to make any of this harder on Lan Zhan...

He took a deep breath, steadying himself, and sat up. “I’m sorry, Lan Zhan. I must’ve... must’ve used too much energy, destroying the amulet, but it’s okay. It’s okay, don’t worry, I’ll try again now. I’ll figure out how to make it work, I promise, I’ll –”

“Wei Ying,” said Lan Zhan, wincing. “Stop.”

Wei Wuxian swallowed. “Stop?”

“You will hurt yourself,” said Lan Zhan, his voice low. “Last night... you went too far, Wei Ying.”

It was Wei Wuxian’s turn to wince. “Lan Zhan, I didn’t, I just – just need to try another couple of ideas, I –”

“You were bleeding,” Jiang Cheng said tightly. Now that Wei Wuxian was looking at him, he could see that his brother still looked pale, and his eyes were pinched with worry. “Out of your ears, and your nose, and your *eyes*.”

“If five iterations of the spell didn’t work it is likely none will,” added Lan Zhan. “We need to change our approach. The cost is too high.”

Wei Wuxian grimaced. “I promise, I can figure it out, I have to –”

“You’re not figuring anything else out here,” said Jiang Cheng, crossing his arms tight over his chest. “You getting yourself hurt or – worse –” the word came out strangled, and Lan Zhan’s arm grew tighter around him “That’s not going to help anyone! You have to be more careful, Wei Wuxian, you were – we thought...”

Wei Wuxian winced again, glancing over at where Sizhui, Jingyi, Zizhen and Jinling were huddled together sleeping. It would have freaked them out, and he knew it. Sizhui, in particular. “Did *they*...” He paused, and mercifully his brother correctly interpreted his silence.

“No, those four didn’t see it. They’d already fallen asleep. Zixuan and Nie-xiong, too.”

Almost as relieved as he was ashamed, Wei Wuxian hung his head, trying to ignore the fact that Nie Mingjue and Lan Qiren were still looking at him.

“I’m sorry,” he said again, unable to keep the bitterness from his voice. “I don’t – know what to do.”

“How could you?” said Nie Mingjue, and Wei Wuxian looked at him in surprise. The man’s tone had been strangely even, almost gentle – Wei Wuxian had almost forgotten what Nie Mingjue’s voice sounded like when there was no suspicion within it, and he wasn’t entirely sure why it sounded like that now. Especially considering the man’s less than eager reaction to Wei Wuxian’s array plan the night before. “This is not a situation any of us could have anticipated, Wei-gongzi, and it is not a problem of your making. You bear no more responsibility to fixing it than anyone else does.”

Wei Wuxian stared for a moment, and then realised he was staring, and looked down at Chenqing instead. “No one else knows how to use demonic cultivation. No one else *can* alter an array like that. Who else’s responsibility can it be? I was supposed to keep them safe – Wen Qing, Mo Xuanyu – I promised them protection and they were taken – how is that anyone’s responsibility but my own?”

“It is also mine,” said Jiang Cheng, and Wei Wuxian looked at his brother in surprise. “Lotus Pier offered sanctuary, and we failed. It is our responsibility too.”

“Jiang Cheng –”

“I mean it,” said Jiang Cheng fiercely. “Listen – we were already discussing changing our approach. We all know there’s no point of your going back to the first plan and trying to create a spell to track lingering spiritual energy, because there won’t be any left by now. Especially after all the demonic cultivation yesterday. And it doesn’t look like that is going to work either.”

“What we need to do is determine why it did not work,” said Lan Zhan. “*Before* you try anything else.”

“At this stage, Xichen, Wen-guniang and Mo-gongzi could be anywhere, assuming they are together,” said Lan Qiren briskly. “Also, should we delay the investigation into the misconduct of the Jin, there shall be more time for the destruction of evidence, and for word to spread that we are not serious in our intent at bringing justice.”

“We can’t sit around doing nothing,” Nie Mingjue said, and Wei Wuxian wondered if between the four of them he was going to get a word in edgewise. “But we won’t. Huaisang and I will go back to Jinlintai, and push forward with the investigation into the camps and the attack at Qionggqi Pass, with the assistance of Jin-gongzi, assuming he is willing. Meanwhile, Lan Qiren will gather disciples to continue searching.”

“We will go from town to town,” Lan Qiren explained. “Someone must have seen something somewhere.”

“Not necessarily,” blurted out Wei Wuxian, before anyone else could cut him off. “We know that they can use portal talismans.”

Lan Qiren grimaced. “Indeed. But we also know they didn’t use them in the tunnels, at least not straight away. Furthermore, even Jin Guangyao will need supplies from somewhere.” He paused. “It is less than we would like,” he admitted. “But we still hope...”

Lan Zhan looked sharply at his uncle, his grip on Wei Wuxian tightening painfully, and Wei Wuxian swallowed. They still hoped that Wei Wuxian would be able to come up with some demonic miracle.

“It’s okay, Lan Zhan,” he murmured. “I’ll do my best.”

“I will come with you,” said Lan Zhan tightly. “You will not do more than you are able to.”

“Come?” Wei Wuxian echoed, and Jiang Cheng nodded.

“Lotus Pier. We’ll take those four back there, too, make sure that they’re safe. And you can carry on working on whatever freaky arrays you like where Shijie, Hanguang Jun, and I can keep an eye on you.”

“It is not fair,” said Lan Zhan quietly, his grip softening a little. “To put so much to you. But...”

Wei Wuxian smiled as best he could. “Ah, Lan Zhan. I said it myself. I’m the only one who can...”

The plan, such as it was, was relayed to the others when they had all woken. Jin Zixuan agreed to assist the Nie brothers in the investigation at Jinlintai, and though Jinling was clearly upset at the idea of leaving his father yet again, he said nothing. The four time-travellers were all very quiet that morning, and from the moment he woke Sizhui stayed within a hair’s breadth of Wei Wuxian or Lan Zhan – often the both of them. Jingyi was a constant, plastered at his side, and for that matter Zizhen was always close by too. Jinling was the only outlier, but only because he was closer to Jin Zixuan than his own shadow.

Unsurprisingly (to Wei Wuxian, at least – Jiang Cheng and Lan Qiren still both looked disbelieving at Huaisang’s contributions) it was Nie Huaisang who added something valuable to the plan.

“I was thinking, Wei-xiong, about why it didn’t work,” he said over breakfast. “The array, I mean. I thought the third variation would *have* to work, but then I wondered whether it would or not if the person it was tracking was in a warded location. I know of no *normal* spell that could reveal the location of someone who was staying somewhere with significant warding, and it’s likely that Jin Guangyao is that careful. I was also thinking that there *might* be a way to set up a sort of alarm – so create a spell to let the caster know when the subject left the wards.”

“Oh...” Wei Wuxian’s mind ran to a million places, logic slotting into place within his head. “That could make sense... I can try!”

He didn’t know that it would be all that much more successful, but he could certainly try.

He would try.

He had to.

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Hands clasped behind his back, Jin Guangyao studied Wen Qing carefully. When the guards brought her to the table, he'd had them remove one of the shackles so they could sit like civilised folk, but she hadn't touched the tea in front of her. He didn't blame her, of course, and he wasn't surprised, but he had always been an excellent host.

It was a useful skill, because it meant he had a head start in knowing how to get what he needed out of her now. A person to protect was the key, really. Wen Yuan would have been ideal, but Mo Xuanyu was an interesting alternative, and not a terrible one. Not when Su She had heard her swear to protect him. There were others, too, that he could make less immediate threats towards. He knew, of course, how dearly Wen Qing adored her brother, though Wen Ning was more of a liability than an asset when Wei Wuxian was alive and well. Wei Wuxian himself was also a good target, one Wen Qing had died for before, in his lifetime. And the rest of her family, too – he still remembered hearing her plead for the eldest among them to be spared, the flutter of guilt in his stomach at a time he still felt such pitiful emotions.

It was likely he wouldn't need such abstract threats, in any case. He had enough here, most probably, to get what he wanted. He poured himself a cup of tea from the same pot as he had poured Wen Qing's, sipping it carefully. Then, he smiled.

“So – what do you need to prepare for the surgery?”

“I swore the first time I performed that surgery that I never would again.”

His smile grew a little stronger. She was clever, not outright refusing him, but offering a little resistance all the same. She was clever, but this was his game. “Unfortunately, that's an oath you are going to have to break. Things will go much smoother if you tell me what you will need. Would you like me to tell you what will happen if you refuse?”

She was good at hiding her fear – if he were a lesser man Jin Guangyao might have missed it, but he saw the fabric of her dress shift as her fists clenched into it beneath the table. Still, her voice was as cold and even as ever. “I have little doubt Jin-gongzi will tell me anyway, whether or not I wish to hear it.”

He let himself laugh softly. The title Jin-gongzi grated after a decade of Jin-zongzhu and Xiandu, but he was growing used to it, between Su She and those loyal disciples he still had. He had no doubt that Wen Qing knew all about the future he had come from – she had seemed far too unsurprised to see him not to. If she was using Jin-gongzi as a slight, he would let her have it. For now.

“I always think it best to take every precaution,” he said, pausing to take another long sip of his tea. “You know Xue Chengmei, do you not?”

“We have met.”

“I thought so,” Jin Guangyao said, smiling. He could see the slight tightness in Wen Qing’s eyes, and he knew that the expression unnerved her. He smiled wider. “Should you choose to misbehave, I will have no choice but to let Chengmei play with Xiao-Xuanyu. You will watch, of course. All of it. He likes killing more than anything, Chengmei, but he is more than capable of drawing out the torture when instructed. And he has no qualms about the age of his victims.” He gave a pout-like frown. “Of course, if you *still* refuse to cooperate, we will torture you, too. Chengmei is all too eager to try the tools we’re keeping next door – mementos from Nightless City, if you understand me. If we must, we will torture you until you do what needs to be done, and we will kill you. Slowly.” He paused, tilting his head to the side slightly in a show of contemplation. “Perhaps drowning,” he said. “I’ve watched you burn once before. It would be more interesting to try something new.”

Wen Qing was silent for a moment. She was too poised to swallow or flinch, to give the signals most folk gave when they were unnerved or afraid, but it just made it all the more satisfying to notice the slight clench of her jaw, and the miniscule furrow of her brow. “Is that not the fate I face, whatever I do? I am not so naïve to believe this will end in anything other than my death.”

“Not necessarily,” said Jin Guangyao, putting down his teacup and smoothing his sleeves. “If you cooperate fully, there will be no cause to hurt you, or Xuanyu. Should you behave, you shall be set free as soon as the operation is complete.”

She stiffened, her lips pursing slightly as anger glinted in her eyes. He wondered if she felt patronised, made to feel like a fool. Most probably. The thought made him smile.

“I am sure you don’t believe me,” he said, making sure his tone was a touch condescending. “But it is the truth. Should you do as you are told, you will be of no more use to me dead than you would be alive. Moreover, you could consider your life payment for your service.”

“Oh? I wouldn’t be another witness to silence?” she asked, and he smiled.

“Tell me, Wen-guniang, where are we?” She was silent, staring guardedly at him, and he continued. “What am I going to do next? Where am I going? How am I planning to leave? Who will I take with me? You know nothing that is a threat to me now. I know my reputation in the cultivation world will be ruined beyond repair by the time A-Ling and his little friends are done, not to mention Wei Wuxian and the great Hanguang Jun – one more witness to my evil deeds cannot hurt me. Not when you know nothing of what is coming next.”

Wen Qing said nothing, but she also didn’t look down, or away. She had always been brave. Last time, she’d been so brave she hadn’t started screaming until the flames were halfway up her thighs.

“I don’t expect you to believe me. But I assure you, things will go much better for you if you cooperate. Now...” He lifted up the small, simple box beside him and pulled out several sheaths of paper, a pen, and an inkstone, sliding them across the table to Wen Qing. “I want you to write down everything you will need to prepare for the surgery, and then a detailed description of how the surgery is to work. Leave nothing out.”

Wen Qing paused, unmoving, and Jin Guangyao let his smile fall away.

“Wen-guniang. For Xiao-Xuanyu’s sake, I advise you not to test me.”

Wen Qing closed her eyes for a moment, letting her head bow, and then she took the pen.  
“Whose core do you intend to use?”

“That does not concern you just yet,” said Jin Guangyao, and she pursed her lips again, and began to write.

Initially, his plan had been to take the core from his younger self. The idea of having a part of a stranger inside him turned his stomach slightly – this seemed easier. It was already his, after all. But his own core had never been strong, and the temptation to seek a better one was large. His indecision had been solved when Wen Qing said that the core needed to be given willingly.

It was unlikely he would be able to either bribe or threaten his younger self into sacrificing his golden core. He could threaten to hurt Xichen, but they would both know he would never go through with it. Threatening further torture to his younger self also seemed unlikely to work, and in any case the thought of it sat strangely in his stomach. It had been bad enough cutting off the younger man’s finger to ensure that they were no longer connected, that whatever happened to his younger self would not directly affect him. It wasn’t guilt, exactly, that had struck him then, but it was an uncomfortable feeling all the same. He was not sure yet, if he would let his younger self live. His mind kept going back and forth – for now, the younger man was contained. But he was certain that was that he would not take his own core back from his younger self.

He was *also* certain that he knew who *would* be his donor, and it would be a lie to say the thought didn’t thrill him. To take out two birds with one stone, to set all his pieces back into place, to have a golden core that powerful, that *strong*...

But there was more to prepare. He could not get complacent. He would not. That was a mistake he had made once before.

He would not make it again.

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Sizhui had never felt so empty in all his life. Coming back to Lotus Pier had felt horribly like defeat– A-Yuan had come running up to Wei Wuxian and Hanguang Jun as soon as he saw them, asking Hanguang Jun innocently if he had managed to help his brother, and if Qing-jiejie had come back with them. Wei Wuxian’s voice had choked as he picked the boy up, saying not yet, they hadn’t found them yet, but A-Yuan wasn’t to worry.

And then he had hugged A-Yuan, and passed him straight to Popo, saying that he had work to do, and it didn’t seem to matter to A-Yuan that Wei Wuxian looked stricken as he apologised. The boy’s little lip quivered, and tears grew in his eyes, and Wei Wuxian had winced as he turned out of the hall and fled, Hanguang Jun on his heels.

It had been evening by the time they got back, Jiang Yanli had insisted that Sizhui, Jingyi, Jinling and Zizhen all ate and bathed before they did anything else, but Sizhui couldn’t feel better for it. Not when his golden core was still so alive within him, when Jin Guangyao wanted Wen Qing to – to –



He could only pray that it wasn't Zewu Jun's core Jin Guangyao wanted to take. If it wasn't, they might still have some time. But if it was, if Jin Guangyao was forcing Wen Qing to cut open Sizhui's uncle as he was sitting in a bathtub, Sizhui would never forgive himself. He wanted to look, to help, but Jiang-zongzhu tiredly told him there was nothing they could do right now, so it would be best to get some sleep. The other three had managed to do so, but even though it was past nine by now, Sizhui couldn't sleep.

Instead, he found himself making his way to the rooms Wei Wuxian had described as his workshop the day before. He hesitated in front of the door. Inside, he could hear murmuring, and he swallowed. Then, he knocked.

"Come in," Wei Wuxian said tiredly, and Sizhui ducked inside, bowing automatically.

"I'm sorry to--"

"Aiya, Sizhui, don't bow to me like that," Wei Wuxian said, beckoning him inside. He was sitting on the floor before a half-drawn array, two books open in his lap, and another on the ground beside him. Hanguang Jun was kneeling, holding that particular book open. He looked tired. "What's wrong?"

Sizhui opened his mouth, but nothing came out. What *wasn't* wrong? Wei Wuxian's lips parted, his brow furrowing in concern, and worrying Wei Wuxian was the last thing Sizhui wanted to do. He swallowed, and managed to say, "I can't sleep, I – I want to help."

Wei Wuxian's face softened at once, and Hanguang Jun closed his eyes. "Ah, Sizhui..." He held out his arm, nodding at the spot beside him, and Sizhui picked his way over, careful of the talismans on and notes strewn over the ground. He sat down beside Wei Wuxian, who immediately tucked his left arm around him. "Hold that book there open for me, will you? That will help."

Sizhui nodded, reaching out to pin down the page Wei Wuxian had abandoned. His throat felt very tight – he had wanted to help, not to take up one of Wei Wuxian's hands, but the man pulled him close.

"We all feel a little useless right now," he whispered into Sizhui's hair. "But we'll figure it out, okay? I don't want you to worry. We'll fix it."

Sizhui swallowed, wishing that he could believe it. "Is this the tracking array? The one that would flare up when the person leaves the wards?"

"Mm-hm," said Wei Wuxian. "At least the draft of it. We've only got enough blood left to try once – it has to be perfect. Lan Zhan, can you turn the page please?"

Hanguang Jun obliged, and Wei Wuxian nodded to himself. "Alright, that's what I thought... so if that's over there, we can use this sigil here, and then..."

Soon, the words Wei Wuxian murmured began to fly over Sizhui's head. Every now and again, Wei Wuxian would ask Lan Zhan or Sizhui to turn the pages backwards or forwards,

and occasionally Hanguang Jun would offer a quiet reply to one of his questions, but for the most part Wei Wuxian spoke to himself.

After a while, Jiang Wanyin walked inside with a tray in his hands, his eyes widening slightly when they fell on Sizhui.

“Jiang Cheng,” Wei Wuxian said wearily. “What are you doing here?”

Jiang Wanyin scowled. “What does it look like? Bringing you snacks like a damn servant, that’s what I’m doing.” He walked carefully through the mess on the floor and then snatched the book Wei Wuxian was still holding out of his hand, putting the tray down where it had been. “Eat. You can have it back after you’ve emptied your bowl.”

Wei Wuxian scowled back. “Jiang Cheng-”

But then Hanguang Jun carefully closed the book he was holding open, tucking a sheet of paper inside to save the place, and he looked meaningfully at Sizhui. Well used to silent instructions from his father, Sizhui obediently shut the book that he was holding, making sure to save the place. Wei Wuxian looked at them incredulously.

“You need to eat,” said Hanguang Jun, and Wei Wuxian sighed.

“Fine. Fine! But I’m not forgetting this.” He took his arm away from Sizhui, sending him a hurt look of that turned Sizhui’s stomach. “Betrayed by my own son...”

“Xian-gege-” Sizhui began, his heart in his throat, but Hanguang Jun interrupted him.

“Not betrayed. Sizhui is helping.”

Wei Wuxian rolled his eyes, and Jiang Wanyin smacked his shoulder.

“I mean it – eat!” he paused, looking at the two bowls of congee and then at Sizhui. “I’m sorry, Sizhui, I didn’t realise you were still up.”

“Thank you for your concern, Jiang-zongzhu,” Sizhui said appreciatively, smiling a little. “It’s alright, I’m really not hungry.”

Jiang Wanyin frowned at him, and Sizhui’s heart sank. If he had managed to offend Wei Wuxian and Jiang Wanyin in the span of a minute –

“You don’t have to call me Jiang-zongzhu,” he said, frowning. “Jiang-xiong works just fine.”

Sizhui blinked, and then smiled slightly. “Thank you, Jiang-xiong.” It sounded horribly informal, but it made Jiang Wanyin smile, and Wei Wuxian make a strange, happy sound, as he ate, and that made up for it.

“You’re welcome,” said Jiang Wanyin, glancing at Hanguang Jun. “Uh, I made you a bowl, too.”

“Sizhui may have it,” said Hanguang Jun, but Sizhui couldn’t help but frown. Hanguang Jun had not eaten much at all at dinner – Sizhui had noticed.

“Truthfully, Baba, I’m not hungry,” he said, offering a small smile. “Lying is forbidden. Please take it.”

Hanguang Jun stared at the congee, and then inclined his head, taking it with a small, murmured “Thank you,” to Jiang Wanyin.

Wei Wuxian snorted, pointing his chopsticks at Hanguang Jun. “See? It’s no fun when the shoe’s on the other foot, is it?”

“Shut up,” said Jiang Wanyin, prodding Wei Wuxian’s leg. “Don’t talk with your mouth full.”

Wei Wuxian made a face, but he ate the rest of the bowl without talking. After a few minutes, both bowls were cleared, and Jiang Wanyin gave a satisfied nod. “I’ll leave the tea here and grab another cup for Sizhui. Then I’ll get out of your hair. As long as…” he paused, looking at Hanguang Jun, who gave a sombre nod.

“We will take care of them,” he said, nodding towards Sizhui, and Jiang Wanyin nodded.

“Thank you,” he said, surprisingly wholeheartedly, and Wei Wuxian rolled his eyes.

“It doesn’t take two full-grown Lans to look after me –” he began, but Jiang Wanyin smacked him on the head with the book he had confiscated.

“Yes,” he said, passing the book back, “it does. Now shut up and get to work, and let them look after you.”

“Yes, zongzhu,” chanted Wei Wuxian with a salute, and Jiang Wanyin rolled his eyes and left the room. Hanguang Jun silently re-opened his book, and Sizhui did the same. Wei Wuxian’s arm didn’t wrap around him again, as he was currently using his left hand to sip tea instead, but Sizhui didn’t mind too much.

Maybe he actually *was* helping, now. Maybe, making sure Wei Wuxian took care of himself while he worked was the best he could do.

Jiang Wanyin returned after a few minutes with another cup, which Sizhui accepted gratefully. Wei Wuxian made a request for some alcohol, if the waiter wasn’t too busy, but he didn’t look up from his books as he did, and Jiang Wanyin scoffed as he walked away, promising to drown Wei Wuxian in alcohol if he wasn’t too careful. He brought no alcohol, but he did bring a fresh pot of tea an hour later.

Time passed, the night growing older around them, and when the second pot of tea ran out Wei Wuxian’s arm wound around Sizhui again. Though Hanguang Jun’s shoulders drooped and Sizhui had to stifle many a yawn, neither of them moved. Wei Wuxian asked them if they needed to, at around eleven o’clock, but Sizhui shook his head.

He tried to think of an excuse other than the somewhat embarrassing truth that he felt safer here with both of his parents, but before he could, Hanguang Jun said, “I will rest when Wei

Ying rests,” and Sizhui was able to nod, and say “Mn,” and that was the end of it.

It had to have been gone midnight when Wei Wuxian sat up straight. “I think... I think that’s it. At least, I can’t think of anything else to add or take away or change, I... I think it’s as good as I can make it.” He sounded unsure, something Sizhui wasn’t used to, and he glanced nervously at Hanguang Jun. His father’s eyes were fixed on Wei Wuxian, looking just as concerned as Sizhui felt, but he nodded.

“I trust you.”

Wei Wuxian gave a weak smile. “Attempt the impossible,” he whispered, and then he gave a single nod. “Right, get behind me, both of you. I don’t expect there’ll be much in the way of backlash but better safe than sorry.”

At once, Hanguang Jun rose to his feet, and Sizhui copied, his heart suddenly picking up speed in his chest. He backed away until he reached the wall, and Hanguang Jun stood close beside him, angling his body slightly in front of Sizhui’s. A lump rose in Sizhui’s throat, and he let his fingers brush against his father’s sleeve, fighting the urge to cling to his hand instead.

Kneeling on the ground before them, Wei Wuxian took a deep breath, and took out a small knife, and Sizhui’s heart shattered as he cried out –

*The whistling grew higher, quicker, and the amulet spun faster –*

*And then the whistling stopped, and the amulet froze.*

*And Sizhui looked up over his shoulder at Wei Wuxian – just in time to see the man plunge the knife deep into his own chest. Pain ripped through Sizhui so fiercely for a moment he thought he must have been stabbed too, and he barely heard the wail he let out as Wei Wuxian fell to his knees, a small, sad smile on his face. His eyes met Sizhui’s, but then they glazed over, and he slumped backwards, and by the time Wei Wuxian’s head hit the floor, his eyes were empty.*

A hand grabbed his tightly, pulling him out of the memory, and Sizhui saw Wei Wuxian glancing over his shoulder at him, still kneeling, but now frowning worriedly.

“Sizhui? What’s wrong?”

Sizhui struggled for breath, and Hanguang Jun squeezed his hand. “What – what are you – Xian-gege –”

Wei Wuxian’s face softened as realisation dawned in his eyes, and he shook his head slightly. “Oh... it’s not like *that* spell, Sizhui. It’s okay, I promise.”

Sizhui swallowed, looking up at Hanguang Jun, and his father gave a small nod, squeezing his hand just a little tighter. Sizhui took a deep breath, and bit down hard on his lip so he wouldn’t interrupt again.

Wei Wuxian smiled, and then looked back at the array, flicking the blade swiftly across his palm. At once relief flooded through Sizhui, far stronger than the feeling of being a bit of an

idiot, and he let out a soft sigh. Hanguang Jun squeezed his hand again, and Sizhui glanced up. His father's face was pale, even when the soft red light of the array shone on his face, and the fear was tight in his eyes.

If this didn't work...

There was a soft hissing sound, and then the smell of smoke and sulphur, and Sizhui looked back at Wei Wuxian. The man was breathing heavily, his shoulders shuddering slightly, and he reached down and picked a small talisman from the centre of the array.

"Wei Ying?" Hanguang Jun whispered, and Wei Wuxian glanced over his shoulder. His smile was weak, and a little uncertain, but it was there.

"I – I think it worked, but... there's no way of knowing until Su She or whoever it is leaves whatever wards they're in," he admitted. "If it's worked, and he does, I'll know."

Sizhui's knees trembled beneath him, almost as weak as his relief was. It wasn't much – no more than an if and a maybe, but it was something, and it was better than nothing.

"Thank you, Wei Ying," Hanguang Jun murmured, and Wei Wuxian glanced away.

"I would do more, I – if I could..."

"I know," said Hanguang Jun, carefully kneeling beside Wei Wuxian once more. He pulled Sizhui down gently with him, and then looked intently at Wei Wuxian. "Are you well?"

Wei Wuxian nodded. "I'm fine, Lan Zhan. Just tired." He grinned faintly. "You two must be exhausted. It's way past your bedtime."

Sizhui gave an absent "Mn," echoed by Hanguang Jun, and Wei Wuxian gave a soft laugh. He opened his mouth, but then the sound of running footsteps came from outside, and there was a hesitant knock on the door.

"Come in," Wei Wuxian yawned, but his hand was twitching towards Chenqing – until Jingyi slipped through the door. Sizhui blinked in surprise. There were dark rings under Jingyi's eyes, and his hair was a mess, and he was in nothing but his borrowed purple pyjamas. When he saw Sizhui he gave a sigh of relief, and then a bow.

"Hanguang Jun, Wei Wuxian," he said, a little out of breath. "I'm sorry to interrupt, I – I woke up and Sizhui was gone and I thought – I thought he would be with you, but –"

Sizhui winced, guilt twisting in his gut. "I'm sorry, Jingyi. I didn't realise I'd be gone so long."

Jingyi gave him a weak smile, but then his eyes flickered to Hanguang Jun and he hesitated, staring down at his feet. Wei Wuxian's head tilted to the side slightly.

"Jingyi? What is it?" he prompted, and Jingyi swallowed. Then, he bowed, far too low.

"Hanguang Jun... I'm so sorry."

Sizhui's mouth fell open slightly, and he looked at Hanguang Jun, who appeared just as confused as he felt. Wei Wuxian looked between the three of them, and then seemed to realise no one else was going to be the next to speak.

"What are you sorry for? This better not be some Lan apology for getting out of bed after curfew, because neither of these to have got *into* bed yet."

But Jingyi didn't even smile. Instead, his head ducked even lower, so Sizhui couldn't see his face, but he could see his hands trembling.

"When I – when I got back, from the future, when I got back to Cloud Recess, I shouldn't have left. I should've stayed in Gusu, I should have warned Zewu Jun, and – I'm sorry!"

Hanguang Jun's eyes widened almost as quickly as Sizhui's heart sank. Sizhui scrambled to his feet, but Wei Wuxian got there first, striding across the room and gently pulling Jingyi out of the bow.

"Hey," he said, his voice low and serious in a way Sizhui had hardly ever heard it. "Were you or were you not running for your life at that time? With an innocent baby in your arms?"

Jingyi swallowed, looking at the ground. "I should've – if I'd doubled back, then maybe, maybe –"

"Maybe you could have helped Zewu Jun, that's true. But maybe you would have been caught instead – maybe you would have been killed."

Sizhui winced, hurrying to Jingyi's side. Hanguang Jun followed, more sedately.

"It's not your fault, Jingyi," Sizhui murmured. "You know it isn't."

"Things always look obvious in hindsight," said Hanguang Jun quietly. "I do not blame you, Jingyi. This is not your fault."

"And you know the honourable Hanguang Jun never lies," said Wei Wuxian sagely. "So if you don't believe me, believe him."

"It is not your fault either, Wei Ying," said Hanguang Jun softly, and Wei Wuxian looked sharply at him. "I do not lie."

Wei Wuxian gave the saddest smile Sizhui had ever seen, shaking his head slightly. "Ah, Lan Zhan... Well, it's too late to be talking about things like this. It is well beyond time for all Lans to be in bed! Come on now, all of you. Come on."

He steered them out of the room like wayward sheep, all the way back to his rooms. Sizhui distinctly remembered Jiang Jianyu saying that Hanguang Jun was under no circumstances to be allowed to sleep in Wei Wuxian's bedroom, but he was far too tired to care.

"Get some sleep," Wei Wuxian ordered him, hugging him close for a moment. When he let go, Hanguang Jun hugged Sizhui too, and despite everything Sizhui felt a little calmer, and a

little safer. When he pulled back to see that Wei Wuxian had also hugged Jingyi, he felt happier, too. “We’ll see you in the morning, okay?”

“Goodnight Xian-gege, Hanguang Jun,” Sizhui murmured, making his way to the far end of Wei Wuxian’s rooms with Jingyi. Before he got into bed, however, he seized Jingyi into a hug, and was promptly squeezed so tight that it hurt.

“You scared me,” Jingyi whispered, and Sizhui squeezed back. “I thought they’d portal-ed their way in and snatched you from under my nose.”

“I’m sorry,” Sizhui said, and then he pulled back to meet his eye. “Jingyi – you know it really isn’t your fault, don’t you? Bobo – Bobo being missing is not your fault.”

Jingyi glanced down, pursing his lips. “I – I know... But it feels like it is.”

“Well, it isn’t,” said Sizhui firmly, pulling Jingyi back into a hug. “It isn’t. And if he’d got you too...”

Jingyi shuddered slightly, but his voice was teasing when he spoke. “You’d be lost without your Da-ge?”

“I would be,” said Sizhui without hesitating, and Jingyi stiffened. Then, he hugged Sizhui even tighter.

“You’re supposed to fight me on this,” he scolded. “Anyone else would be desperate to be known as the older twin.”

“Ridiculous,” said Sizhui fondly. “You are older than me.”

Jingyi gave a watery little laugh, pulling back, and Sizhui surrendered to a yawn. “Alright, didi. Race you to sleep?”

Sizhui snorted softly, giving a half-hearted nod as he all but fell into bed.

They never would know who won that race. They were both asleep before their heads hit their pillows.

## Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed that chapter! Please do leave a comment if you'd like to, I love reading them! Until next time, please take care!

## Chapter 28

### Chapter Notes

Thank you for all your lovely comments, I'm glad you enjoyed the last chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It had worked. Unbelievably, impossibly, it had worked – the talisman had burnt against Wei Wuxian's chest shortly after breakfast, surprising him so much that he'd shrieked, and almost sent both Jiang Cheng and Lan Zhan into qi deviation. Wei Wuxian couldn't even feel guilty about it – the shock and relief coursing through him had been too powerful to let it.

After all, he hadn't let himself believe that the talisman *could* work. Not when everything else had failed. He didn't have much more hope left to lose, and he was determined to use what he had to keep Lan Zhan and Sizhui and the others from falling into despair.

He hadn't expected the talisman would work, and definitely not to work so soon.

But it had, and now they were flying, chasing the soft, glowing arrow of the talisman south-east. There'd been some argument over who was coming, with Jiang Cheng protesting that it didn't make sense for them all to go and that the time-travellers, at least, should stay behind. Both Sizhui and Jingyi had appealed to Lan Zhan, begging to be allowed to help their clan leader. As soon as they were granted permission to go, Jinling had turned as red as Wei Wuxian's hair ribbon, and started a tirade about fairness and ridiculousness and side-quests, sounding so much like Jiang Cheng that Wei Wuxian had to turn away to snicker. Though Zizhen didn't protest nearly so loudly, when Wei Wuxian asked what he thought he quietly insisted he wanted to go.

Then, Wen Ning had also announced *his* determination to come, and there Wei Wuxian had to put his foot down. He hated it, and the look on Wen Ning's face as he insisted he should be allowed to search for his sister all but ripped Wei Wuxian's heart out, but it was too dangerous. If Jin Guangyao had already found Xue Yang or his Yin Iron, they would be able to control Wen Ning no matter how many protective charms Wei Wuxian gave him.

“And I need you to stay with A-Yuan,” he had added, his voice catching in his throat. “Wen Ning, if he came for A-Yuan... please.”

In the end, they were a group of seven – the four time-travellers, Wei Wuxian, Lan Zhan and Jiang Cheng. The talisman worked a little like a compass, and as they grew closer to their target the faint, glowing arrow on the paper grew more defined, and deeper in colour. They had been flying for several hours, almost half a day, when it turned blood red.

“We're close,” Wei Wuxian said to Lan Zhan. “If we want to keep the element of surprise...”



Lan Zhan nodded, and immediately turned his sword down towards the ground. There was a dense forest below them, though to the left Wei Wuxian could see the edge of farmland. They swept down through the trees, and the talisman grew hot in his hand again, burning against his palm.

“We’re very close,” he murmured, tugging Chenqing from his belt as the others raised their swords. “This w –”

The sound of dead wood breaking underfoot cut Wei Wuxian off, and then through the trees he caught sight of a whirl of robes, a figure running away –

“There!” Jingyi shouted, and Wei Wuxian was already running, sprinting after the man as he fled. Lan Zhan was at his side, his face a stony image of pure fury, and Sizhui ran at the other, eyes set in determination. Jingyi was scarcely a hair’s breadth behind him, and the others little further back than that.

The fleeing man glanced over his shoulder, and Wei Wuxian’s jaw clenched.

*Xue Yang.*

With a wild laugh, Xue Yang moved faster, disappearing into the trees, and Wei Wuxian sprinted after him –

And then he hit an invisible wall so hard the air was driven straight from his lungs, and a hot, shattering pain bloomed over his nose. But even as he fell backwards, Wei Wuxian could see Lan Zhan and Sizhui and Jingyi hit the ward too – he could see it glow around them –

And Wei Wuxian hit the ground, and Lan Zhan and Sizhui and Jingyi vanished.

Jinling and Jiang Cheng struck the ward a half-second later, hitting it like Wei Wuxian had, and Zizhen skidded to a halt behind them. Wei Wuxian threw himself onto his knees, dragging air into his winded lungs with a wrenching gasp. He crawled forward, his palm finding the ward, and he dug through his robes for a talisman to break it with, but every one he tried simply fell away, and he shook his head.

“No, no, no – Lan Zhan! Sizhui! Jingyi! Lan Zhan!”

“Shit,” Jiang Cheng wheezed. “Shit, shit, *fuck!*”

“Sizhui!” Wei Wuxian yelled, fear tightening his throat, and Jiang Cheng grabbed his shoulder, tugging him away from the ward.

“Get back!” he ordered, his voice low as he drew his fist back, and Wei Wuxian retreated, Jinling and Zizhen at his side. With a roar, Jiang Cheng smashed Zidian into the ward, sending a shimmer of purple sparks rippling through the air, but the ward didn’t budge. He struck again, and again, and again, each time more desperate, until he stumbled back, gasping for breath.

“Jiujiu!” Jinling cried, and Wei Wuxian saw blood trickling from Jiang Cheng’s nose.

No, no, no this wasn't happening, this couldn't, this couldn't be –

“*Lan Zhan!*” Wei Wuxian roared, throwing himself forward and pounding his fists against the wards. “Sizhui, Jingyi, Lan *Zhan!* Xue Yang! Let me in! *Let me in!*”

---

It was a trap. It was a *trap*.

Wangji knew it the second Wei Ying fell away from his side, the second he felt himself pass through a ward he hadn't seen, the second he saw Su She standing several feet in front of him, blade pointed straight at his chest. Digging his heels into the ground, Wangji skidded to a halt, throwing out his arm to stop Sizhui from overtaking him, and in the same moment he saw a flash of black robes lung at them from the side. Even as Wangji spun towards them, Jingyi was ripped away from Sizhui's side, and Wangji put himself in front of his son, lunging towards Xue Yang. The man danced out of reach with a laugh, one of his hands twisted deep in Jingyi's hair. The other pressed a sword to his throat.

“Jingyi!” Sizhui cried, and Lan Wangji levelled his sword towards Xue Yang, holding up the sheath in his other hand as a defence against Su She.

“Let him go,” Lan Wangji ordered, fury trembling in his voice, and Xue Yang pouted, tilting his head to the side in a mockery of contemplation that made Wangji's jaw clench.

“Uh... No, you know, I don't think I will,” he said, and then he sent a hard kick to the back of Jingyi's legs, forcing him down onto his knees. Jingyi winced, but he didn't make a sound, though Wangji heard Sizhui bite back a cry behind him. Xue Yang laughed. “No, definitely not. If this one's Lan Jingyi he's mine to play with.”

“Let him go,” Lan Wangji growled again, stepping forward.

Xue Yang gave a dramatic sigh, and then his sword flashed, and Jingyi gave a cry of pain. Wangji's eyes widened as a long, red line appeared across Jingyi's neck, and Sizhui yelped.

“*Jingyi!*”

“Don't make me kill him too soon, Hanguang Jun,” said Xue Yang, sticking out his bottom lip like a petulant child. “That's no fun for anyone.” He tugged Jingyi's head back, forcing him to look up and meet his eye. The movement pulled at the wound on Jingyi's neck, widening it, and the boy gave a gasp of pain. As Sizhui choked, and the blood ran down Jingyi's throat, Wangji forced himself to breathe slowly, to betray none of his own fear. The wound was shallow – it was a flesh wound – he would be *fine*. They could not panic. He had to think. He could see the fear in Jingyi's eyes, but there was defiance there, too, and the boy was glaring as he met Xue Yang's eyes. Xue Yang grinned, looking slowly up at Lan Wangji. “Take another step closer to me, and we'll just have to make the other side of his neck match,” he said, pressing his sword a little harder into Jingyi's neck. “I can't promise that wound wouldn't be deeper. So back away, Hanguang Jun. Back away.”

Slowly, Lan Wangji stepped backwards, forcing Sizhui back behind him. A brief, desperate hope hit him – if he could push Sizhui back through the wards, he would be safer, he would

be with Wei Ying, and Wei Ying and the others would know what was happening. Wangji had a better chance of getting to Jingyi without having to worry about leaving Sizhui vulnerable, too. He didn't understand why the wards had only let the three of them through, but he was sure Wei Ying would be able to figure it out.

But then Sizhui stopped, and when Wangji tried pushing him back further, Su She laughed.

"You can't get back out," said Su She, sounding amused. "I can't say I'm surprised you'd just leave this one behind." He jerked his head towards Jingyi. "It's quite fitting."

Wangji moved his glare to Su She, not bothering to dignify such an accusation with words.

Su She laughed softly, shaking his head. Then, he raised his sword again. "Lan-er-gongzi. Sheath your sword." He paused, and then jerked his chin towards Sizhui. "You too. Lan Sizhui, isn't it?"

Lan Wangji couldn't help but shift so he was further between Sizhui and Su She, and his jaw clenched as Xue Yang snickered, and Su She's smile grew wider. Sizhui said nothing, mirroring Wangji's own silence, and pride swelled in Wangji's heart.

"Hanguang Jun," Su She pronounced the name like an insult. "I won't ask again."

Xue Yang pressed his blade tighter into Jingyi's neck, and Wangji felt rage and frustration roar within him so fiercely he wanted to scream. Instead, he slid Bichen back into its sheath, gripping it tightly. Behind him, he heard Sizhui quickly sheath his own sword, and Su She raised his chin smugly.

"Good. Now, seal your own spiritual powers, please. Both of you."

"No!" Jingyi choked, his eyes widening in horror. "No, Hanguang Jun –" Xue Yang dug his sword in deeper, and beads of blood appeared at the edge of the blade, but Jingyi didn't stop. "Don't! Get out of here, run –"

Xue Yang stomped hard on Jingyi's ankle, and his words drowned in a scream – a scream that couldn't mask the sound of breaking bone – and Lan Wangji's stomach twisted. His hand moved across his chest almost without thinking about it, sealing his spiritual energy. Jingyi groaned, squeezing his eyes shut, and Xue Yang laughed.

"This is even easier than Jin-gongzi said it was going to be! Even if you did surprise us. How *did* you get here so soon, by the way? We'd barely even started setting up the trail."

Lan Wangji said nothing. He felt strangely hollow – he wasn't sure if it was his spiritual power being frozen, or if it was just the fear. Nothing about this should be easy, but Wangji had no way to fight, not without endangering Jingyi further.

Su She stepped towards them, his sword still raised. "Answer the question."

For a moment, Wangji was tempted not to answer, but he could hear Jingyi's fear and pain in his gasping breaths, and he said, "Tracking spell."

Su She frowned. “Which one?”

“A new one,” Wangji said.

Su She’s eyes narrowed, but Xue Yang laughed. “Was it one of Wei Wuxian’s? I bet it was. The Yiling Patriarch knows his way around spells of all kinds – he’s my *idol*.”

Su She looked at Xue Yang sharply, and then at Lan Wangji. Slowly, a smirk slid back on to his loathsome face. “Well, he’s not the only one that can create new spells. Have you figured it out now, Hanguang Jun? Why you three are here, why the others are not? I must say, I can’t take full credit for the idea. That would belong to your ancestors.”

A cold fear filled the hollow places inside him, and Wangji couldn’t help but blink, dread crawling up his spine. Su She’s smirk grew stronger, and he tapped his finger slowly against his own forehead. Lan Wangji’s stomach twisted.

Their ribbons.

The wards had allowed Wangji and Sizhui and Jingyi through because of their ribbons – the boys’ tucked beneath their sleeves, but still there.

Su She held out his hand, and Xue Yang let go of Jingyi’s hair for a moment to toss him something that shone white as snow in the air, and when he saw what it was Wangji’s heart clenched so painfully he couldn’t breathe.

It wasn’t just a forehead ribbon – it bore the cloud motif at its centre, and technically there was no proof who exactly it belonged to, but Wangji knew.

*Xiongzhang.*

Su She held it up for a moment, before sliding it into his robes. Lan Wangji wanted to be sick. “It was an easy enough spell to come up with, but so poignant, don’t you think? And don’t worry. I’m sure Jin-gongzi will clean the ribbon before he gives it back to your brother. Zewu Jun will never know it was gone.”

Lan Wangji had never been so angry in his life. He wanted to put his hands around Su She’s neck, to squeeze until the man’s pitiful heart stopped beating, but he couldn’t move, because if he took so much as a step, Xue Yang would hurt Jingyi again.

*He’s going to hurt him again, anyway, despaired a voice at the back of his mind. He is going to hurt him – he’s going to kill him, and we can’t stop him, you can’t stop him!*

Wangji didn’t know what to do.

Su She moved stalked towards Lan Wangji, a smug smile on his face. Wangji didn’t move, but he felt Sizhui tense behind him as Su She grew nearer, the tip of his sword hovering before Wangji’s chest. Then, slowly, it moved down, until the tip of its blade pressed into his stomach.

Jingyi let out a hollow cry, and Wangji could feel Sizhui freeze behind him.

“I’d take a step to the side if I were you, Hanguang Jun,” Su She said softly, and his eyes glinting. “You wouldn’t want Lan Sizhui to be standing behind you for this.”

His heart hammering desperately against his ribs, Lan Wangji smothered the instinct to stay still as stone before his son. If Su She wanted to stab him, he could go ahead, but not like this. Not when the blade could reach Sizhui, too. He stepped to the side slightly, and then back a stride as the tip of the sword dug into stomach. His back hit the wards, solid as a stone wall behind him, and at his side Sizhui let out a sob, going whiter than Wangji’s robes.

“No,” he whispered, his voice broken. “No, no, don’t, please, please Su-zongzhu, please don’t, please!”

Lan Wangji reached out as subtly as he could, taking Sizhui’s hand and squeezing it. Sizhui gave a wounded cry, shaking his head desperately.

“No! *Please!* Don’t, please don’t Su-zongzhu, please, *please!*”

To Wangji’s side, Xue Yang was laughing, and there were tears streaming down Jingyi’s horror-stricken face. For once, the boy was silent, and Lan Wangji was selfishly glad. It was hard enough hearing Sizhui’s terror.

“I was told this would be a familiar sight,” said Su She, staring Wangji in the eye. He looked almost hungry. Wangji knew if there wasn’t a knife to Jingyi’s throat he would be able to wrest the sword away, to at least make an effort to fight for his life, but as it was he was trapped, he was a rabbit in a snare, and there was nothing he could do. “Jin-gongzi wondered how best to do this, you know. But he always has been a fan of symmetry.”

Su She drew his arm back for a second, and then thrust the sword forward, and Wangji heard the sound of metal tearing through flesh, the dull thud of the hilt smacking into skin, and for a split second he wondered why there was no pain.

And then he heard the shocked, choking gasp that ripped from Sizhui’s throat.

And he looked down, and saw Su She pull the sword free from Sizhui’s stomach.

Jingyi screamed, an anguished, desperate howl of a sound, but Wangji could barely hear it. A terror unlike anything he had ever felt before was surging through him, driving pain through every part of his body as Sizhui swayed on his feet, his wide, frightened eyes meeting Wangji’s.

“Baba?” he gasped, and there was blood on his lips. He slumped back against the ward, and began to fall, and Wangji choked on his own cry as he caught him. His knees gave out beneath him and he hit the ground, pulling his son into his lap.

“*Sizhui!*” Jingyi shrieked, and Sizhui shuddered. “Sizhui, *Sizhui!*”

Hands trembling, Lan Wangji bunched up his sleeves to press against the wound, and Sizhui jolted violently, a whimpering choke of pain breaking from his lips.

“I’m sorry,” Wangji choked, watching in horror as his sleeves turned red. “I’m sorry!”

“Baba,” Sizhui whimpered, terror in his eyes as they met Wangji’s.

“You’re okay,” said Lan Wangji, his voice trembling as he put more pressure on the wound. The world around him had fallen away, and all that existed was his son bleeding in his arms, bleeding out in his arms – “You are going to be fine, Sizhui, you will be fine, I promise.” He had never before made a promise he wasn’t certain he could keep, and the words were ash on his lips. If it broke – if he lost Sizhui – if he lost his *son* –

Somewhere nearby, Jingyi was wailing, and Xue Yang was laughing, and Wangji saw Sizhui’s eyelids flicker, saw his face contort with pain.

“Sizhui! Stay awake,” he ordered, but it came out like a broken plea. “Look at me, look at me now. Stay awake, you must stay awake.”

Sizhui sobbed, and blood dripped down from the side of his mouth. “Baba...”

“I’m here,” Lan Wangji promised, tasting the salt of tears he hadn’t noticed falling. “I’m here, Sizhui, but you must stay awake.”

“Now,” said Su She, and he stepped closer, leaning down towards Sizhui.

And Lan Wangji’s world turned red. He eased Sizhui onto the ground, and leapt up, slamming his fist into Su She’s chest. When he’d moved to catch his son he’d dropped Bichen, but it didn’t matter – he would kill Su She with his bare hands, he would rip him limb from limb with his teeth if he had to. Vaguely he heard Xue Yang give a surprised shout, but blood was pounding through his ears and he could see nothing but a red-washed world as he broke Su She’s nose beneath his fist, and slammed his knee up into the man’s groin, and –

Su She struck his chest once, lightly –

And Wangji felt his body fall numb, all control bleeding away as the talisman paralysed him, and he fell back, landing beside Sizhui, landing in a pool of his son’s blood. Desperately, frantically, he willed his limbs to move, but he couldn’t even turn his head, and he could do nothing but watch as Su She towered over them, as he stared scornfully down at his son.

He could hear Sizhui whimpering, and Jingyi crying, and Wangji’s body wouldn’t listen to him, it wouldn’t move. He saw Su She’s shadow fall over his son, saw the man crouch down, but he couldn’t see what the Su She was doing, and then Sizhui choked, his body jerking, and every anguished sound tore at Wangji’s heart.

“Leave him alone!” howled Jingyi, but every word was broken by sobs. “Leave him alone, leave him *alone!* Sizhui!”

“If I leave him alone he will die,” spat Su She. His voice sounded thick with pain. “That is not what Jin-gongzi wants. Not yet.”

*Then why did you stab him?* Lan Wangji wanted to scream, but he couldn’t. *Why didn’t you just stab me?*

He spent an aching long time on the ground, feeling his son's blood soak into his hair and his skin and his robes, listening to every aching cry that fell from his lips, each one of Jingyi's ragged, gasping sobs, but eventually it ended. Su She stood up, and made a sound of disgust in the back of his throat.

"Well, Chengmei. You'll have to carry this one." He kicked his foot into Lan Wangji's chest, but if there was any pain it couldn't register over the anguish in his heart, over knowing that his son was dying beside him, that he could do nothing to stop it. "Let's go."

"Hey," protested Xue Yang. "I was supposed to have some fun! Jin-gongzi promised I could."

Where he had fallen, Wangji couldn't see Jingyi, but he could hear his yelp of pain, and anger and fear burnt within him.

Su She sighed heavily. "Fine, but make it quick."

Xue Yang gave an excited hiss, and then Wangji heard Jingyi cry out, heard the sound of a foot hitting flesh, of a body hitting the ground. Beside him, Sizhui choked, his voice weak and broken as he whispered, "Stop – please – *Jingyi!*"

Su She stepped forward and put his foot against Lan Wangji's cheek. For a moment, Wangji thought the man was going to try and bash his face in with his heel, but instead he pushed Wangji's head to the side, forcing his face away from Sizhui, towards Jingyi. Forcing him to watch.

Jingyi was face down on the ground, his arms raised in a frail attempt to protect his head as Xue Yang kicked at his back and his stomach and his ribcage, the spiritual energy behind each blow horribly obvious, and Wangji could hear every yell of pain, the crack of every bone. Even as he kicked, Xue Yang was also swinging his sword, slicing at Jingyi's legs, and his chest, and his arms. They were glancing blows, not enough to kill but more than enough to hurt, and Xue Yang laughed as he struck them, and the hatred that surged through Wangji was stronger than any he'd ever felt before.

Su She's foot pressed down harder against his cheek, forcing his face into the dirt as the man bent down, crooning quietly to him.

"Why don't you help him, Hanguang Jun? He's a Lan, isn't he? A proper, true blooded Lan – worth something because his parents were part of the inner clan. You should help him."

The words were lemon juice on an open wound. No matter how desperately Wangji willed his muscles to move, nothing would – he couldn't even close his eyes. He couldn't help Jingyi as Xue Yang kicked and sliced at him, as blood sprayed the ground around him, as Sizhui begged in a voice that grew weaker by the heartbeat.

His words were slurring together, mumbled pleas of "Stop," and "Jingyi," and "Baba," and "*Please,*" and Wangji knew he was getting weaker. Wangji knew it was his own fault. If he'd kept his control, if he hadn't lunged for Su She, Sizhui could still be in his arms, he could still be putting pressure on the wound, he could still be keeping him calm.

With a trailing laugh, Xue Yang kicked at Jingyi's head, and Su She stood up. "Chengmei!"

Xue Yang paused, frowning. "What? And don't use that tone with me, *Minshan*. I don't answer to you."

"Jin-gongzi wants him conscious, remember? How can he deliver the message if he's unconscious? Perhaps you should give it to him before you kick all the sense out of him."

Xue Yang rolled his eyes, staring up at the sky as though he was truly hard done by. "Fine."

He crouched down, his knee digging into Jingyi's back, and then he pulled back Jingyi's hair, leaning down until his face was close to the boy's ear. Wangji could see Jingyi flinching, see him trembling, but Jingyi couldn't pull away and Wangji couldn't help him. He couldn't hear whatever message Xue Yang wanted Jingyi to relay, but he couldn't help but cling to the meagre hope of it. If they wanted Jingyi to deliver a message, then they would hopefully want him alive to deliver it.

A few moments later, Xue Yang raised his head, frowning at Su She. "I guess you're going to say that I can't cut out his tongue in that case, either?"

Horror stabbed at Wangji's heart, and he saw Jingyi look up in terror. Before Su She could say anything, however, Sizhui coughed, and then he coughed again, and then he was choking, and Su She swore, and terror filled every inch of Wangji's body.

"Chengmei, we have to go, now!"

"Can't I gouge out his eyes first? If I can't take his tongue, then at least--"

"No," said Su She, and Wangji saw his shadow rise – saw that he was cradling Sizhui in his arms – and he could see Sizhui shaking, convulsing.

*No, no, no – please – please, please, please let him live, please, please, please –*

"Grab Hanguang Jun, we're going!"

Xue Yang sighed dramatically, sheathing his sword and stowing it in his sleeve. He took a step towards Wangji, but then he paused, a dark grin spreading across his face. He pulled a knife from his sleeve, and then bent down, grabbing Jingyi's wrist and pressing it to the ground.

"No," Jingyi choked. "Please –"

The green glow of a portal talisman lit the ground around Lan Wangji, and Su She snapped, "*Chengmei!*"

"Urgh!" Xue Yang protested, standing up and jogging over, tossing the knife absently over his shoulder. Jingyi cried out, but Wangji couldn't see where it struck or what had happened, because Xue Yang was in the way, and then he seized the back of Lan Wangji's collar, dragging him up off of the ground.



Then the portal talisman activated, and Lan Wangji was pulled into the black.

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They were gone. There was a flash of green light, and the sound of Sizhui choking, and then they were gone. Jingyi was alone, alone on freezing ground, and everything hurt. There was so much pain he couldn't tell where each wound began and ended, he couldn't tell where he was bleeding, where he was bruised, where he was broken. A few injuries hurt fiercer than the others – his ankle felt like it was on fire, throbbing and aching, and he could feel the cold metal of Xue Yang's knife still embedded in his side. He didn't want to take it out. He knew he would bleed out if he did.

He didn't know how much more pain he could take.

Suddenly, he heard a shout, and he jumped, a dozen injuries shrieking in painful protest. Wincing, he tried to raise his head, and he saw people running towards him, he saw Zizhen and Jinling and Wei Wuxian and Jiang Wanyin, and a sob broke free from his chest.

"Jingyi!" He couldn't tell who was calling his name, if it was two or three or all of them, but he did see that it was Zizhen who got there first, falling down to his knees beside him.

"Oh god, oh god," he choked, his hands hovering over the knife in Jingyi's side, as though he was too afraid to touch him. "Jingyi – he's been stabbed, there's – the knife is still *in him!*"

In a whirlwind of motion, Wei Wuxian crashed down beside Zizhen, and Jingyi shuddered, looking up at him. It was hard to breathe, let alone speak, but he had to, he *had* to, because –

"Sizhui," he choked, and Wei Wuxian's eyes filled with horror. "Su – She – stabbed him, badly... Took him – took him – and Han – Hanguang Jun – they're – gone –"

Zizhen gasped, and somewhere nearby Jinling started swearing, his voice high and brittle and breaking, and Wei Wuxian –

Wei Wuxian looked like he'd been stabbed himself.

"What do you mean?" he asked, frantically, urgently, and Jingyi sobbed. "What do you mean gone, what do you mean *stabbed?*"

"Like – like he – stabbed – Hanguang Jun – before." The words hurt as he forced them out, and he could taste iron in his mouth. "Gone – with – portal... Was – trap – all a – all a trap... Xue Yang – had – m'ssge..." Without his permission, his eyelids fluttered, and Jingyi sucked in as deep a breath as he could, only to let it out in a sob as his ribs screamed.

"Jingyi!" Zizhen cried fearfully, and then there was a hand holding his, warm against the aching ice of Jingyi's fingers, and another hand on his forehead, pushing his hair back.

"Stay with us, now," Wei Wuxian ordered, and Jingyi looked up at him, wondering why the man looked so blurry and far away. "Jingyi, stay with me, okay? What was the message?"

"Wei Wuxian –" Jiang Wanyin began, but Wei Wuxian snapped over his shoulder.

“We need to know, and if it keeps him awake and alert that’s not a bad thing!” Wei Wuxian’s voice was sharp and dangerous, but his hand was gentle in Jingyi’s hair, and fresh tears stung in his eyes. Then, Wei Wuxian’s voice softened, too. “What message, Jingyi?”

“Jin Guangyao says – says to b-back off. Says if – if you – stop looking – he – he’ll give them back. ‘n a week, at – at Lotus Pier... But if – if you keep – looking – Xue Yang – Xue Yang gets to play...”

Xue Yang’s awful, gleeful laugh rang loud through Jingyi’s mind and he shuddered, closing his eyes as if that would stop him hearing it.

“Hey, hey!” Wei Wuxian yelped, patting Jingyi’s cheek gently. “Eyes open, Jingyi, look at me –”

But it was hard – his eyelids were so heavy, and everything hurt so badly, and he could all but feel the relief of sleep, like a word dancing on the tip of his tongue.

“Jingyi!” Zizhen begged, and the hand around his squeezed gently. “Please, Jingyi...”

*“Stop – please – Jingyi!”*

Sizhui had sounded so weak when he was begging – Sizhui had taken a sword to the stomach and *still* begged for Jingyi’s life, and Jingyi couldn’t even keep his eyes open for Zizhen. He tried, the effort dragging a whimper from his lips, and he heard Zizhen sob.

“Wei Wuxian, what do we do? What do we do?”

“There’s still a knife in him!” Jinling’s voice said, still too high and wavering. “Do we take it out? Jiujiu, what do we *do*?”

“We get him somewhere safe,” said Jiang Wanyin, and Jingyi heard Wei Wuxian take a sharp breath.

“We can’t leave,” he said tightly. “They – they’re –”

“Gone,” said Jiang Wanyin, and Jingyi sobbed. “They’re gone, Wei Wuxian, and if this was a trap there’ll be no clues of anything – they could be anywhere, by now!”

“Jiang Cheng,” Wei Wuxian said, and his voice sounded wrong – it sounded like he was sobbing, and the hand on Jingyi’s forehead trembled. “Jiang Cheng, I can’t leave them, I can’t – I have to – I have to –” There was the sound of footsteps, and then Wei Wuxian let out a muffled howl.

“I know,” said Jiang Wanyin quietly. His voice sounded nearer now. “I know, but we need to get Jingyi back to safety.”

“Take him,” Wei Wuxian begged, his voice still a little muted. “Take him, and I’ll stay here, and-”

“They’re already picking us off one by one,” said Jiang Wanyin, and the hand around Jingyi’s tightened. Jingyi tried to squeeze it back, but he was so tired... “We can’t split up. We need to get Jingyi back to Lotus Pier, we need to regroup.”

“Jiujiu, it’s so far,” murmured Jinling. “Jingyi – he...”

“I can’t,” Wei Wuxian sobbed. “I can’t – Jiang Cheng, I have to at least try...”

“We can take him back,” said Zizhen, his voice hollow. “Jinling and I – we can get Jingyi back to Lotus Pier.”

“No,” Wei Wuxian choked, in the same second that Jiang Wanyin said, “Absolutely not.”

“We – we have to do something!”

“Okay, okay!” Jiang Wanyin shouted. “Jinling, Wei Wuxian – look for clues, if you think there are any! Stay in eyesight! Zizhen and I will do what we can for Jingyi here!”

Someone sniffed, and then the hand on Jingyi’s forehead disappeared.

“It’s going to be okay, Jingyi,” Zizhen promised, voice trembling. “It’s going to be okay.”

The last thought in Jingyi’s mind before he passed out was that he wasn’t sure anything would ever be okay again.

## Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed that chapter (so to speak). Please do let me know what you think!

(Also, I promise this story does have a happy ending! We're just experiencing some angst on the way to it.)

# Chapter 29

## Chapter Notes

Hi! Thank you so much for your amazing reviews for the last chapter! I hope you enjoy this one!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Getting Wei Wuxian back to Lotus Pier was like cradling a naked flame in bare hands. Jiang Cheng knew he couldn't push too hard, or too fast, or too far – he knew if he did his brother's anger would flare bright and burn them all, or alternatively extinguish, leaving nothing but an ashen shell of a person behind. Not that Jiang Cheng could blame him, either way. He felt hollow and sick and afraid himself – he couldn't imagine how much worse this would be for his brother. It hurt to even try.

While Jiang Cheng did what he could to set Jingyi's ankle and dress the worst of his wounds, Wei Wuxian and Jinling had found Su She and Xue Yang's small camp. It looked like they had been expecting to stay for several days, based on the supplies there, but there was nothing to tie them back to where they had been, or where they were going next. Jiang Cheng had known that there wouldn't be, but he trapped his 'I told you so's behind his teeth, and spoke as softly as he could, imploring Wei Wuxian to retreat with them for Jingyi's sake.

"He needs a doctor," he said, letting his fear creep into his voice. He felt a little embarrassed to do so in front of Jinling and Zizhen, and a little guilty too, but he hoped desperately it would be enough to coax his brother into coming back. "I can't carry him and protect Jinling and Zizhen on my own. Please, Wei Wuxian. What more can we do here?"

Jinling mumbled something under his breath about not needing any protection, but his arms were wound tightly around his chest and his eyes were fixed on the unconscious Jingyi, and Jiang Cheng recognised a token protest when he saw one.

"What can I do anywhere?" Wei Wuxian asked bitterly. Thick, black smoke was curling from Chenqing and the flute was shaking violently in his hands, but Jiang Cheng could see more anguish than anger in his brother's eyes. "What can I do anywhere?"

"We can have another look at the array, see if –"

"Su She's back behind whatever damn wards he has now, it doesn't matter!" yelled Wei Wuxian, his voice suddenly loud and violent, and Zizhen and Jinling both flinched, wide eyed.

"So you're telling me you're giving up?" Jiang Cheng demanded, holding his nerve even as his brother bared his teeth. "Because that's the alternative! Even if we knew where we were going, do you think we could storm Jin Guangyao with the four of us? With Jingyi here, like

this? If you stay here, if you think it doesn't matter what you do, wherever you are, then you're giving up, Wei Wuxian – but I won't! Yes, we have to backtrack now, *again*, and yes, I don't know what the *fuck* I'm doing or how I'm going to do it, but I do know that I'll keep looking and I'll keep fighting for as long as it takes – till the end of fucking time, if I have to! I'm not giving up on your son or your – whatever the hell Lan Wangji and Wen Qing are to you now! I'm not giving up on my family, and I'm not letting you give up, either! So get up, and let's go!"

Wei Wuxian glared at him, but the tears in his eyes dulled its viciousness, and he looked away. Then, he nodded once.

"Jinling, grab their swords," ordered Jiang Cheng, and the boy hastened to obey. "Zizhen, can you take Wei Wuxian?"

Zizhen nodded mutely, and Jiang Cheng turned his attention back to Jingyi. He swallowed. The injuries were extensive, and Jiang Cheng didn't want to make anything worse. He'd told Zizhen it was probably a good thing Jingyi had lost consciousness as it would likely help the pain, but truthfully he didn't know. As gently as he could, he scooped Jingyi up off of the ground, cradling him against his chest. Jingyi gave a quiet whimper, his eyes roaming beneath his eyelids and his face pinching into a frown, and Jiang Cheng winced.

"It's okay," he murmured, adjusting his grip. "It's okay, Jingyi, you're going to be fine." Glancing at the others, he raised his voice. "Let's go."

But then, less than two minutes after they took off, Jiang Cheng heard Zizhen cry out behind him, and he turned to see Wei Wuxian plummeting down towards the earth, Zizhen and Jinling shooting down after him on their swords. Even as Jiang Cheng cried out, the boys caught him, each snatching one of Wei Wuxian's arms, but his head lolled down against his chest and he looked like a rag doll, and Jiang Cheng sped down so fast his eyes watered.

The boys hit the floor just seconds before he did, easing Wei Wuxian down onto the grass.

"Wei Wuxian!" Zizhen was saying, shaking his shoulder, and Jinling was backing away, tugging at his hair.

"What happened?" he cried, looking between Jiang Cheng and Wei Wuxian. "What's going on?"

"I don't know," Zizhen said, as Wei Wuxian's eyelids flickered. He was pale, far too pale, and as Jiang Cheng watched his brother moaned. Zizhen shook his head. "One second he was fine and then – I could hear – it sounded like he was – like he was gasping for breath but – when I asked, he – I thought maybe he was crying, but – but then he – he just fell, and –"

"Shit," Jiang Cheng muttered, crouching down on one knee and balancing Jingyi against his chest, reaching out with one arm to seize his brother's shoulder. "Wei Wuxian! Wake up!"

Wei Wuxian's eyes squeezed more tightly shut, and then they flew open and he gasped, shooting upright. Then, just as quickly, what little colour he had drained out of his face, and

he would have slumped back again if Jiang Cheng and Zizhen weren't still holding his shoulders.

"Hey, hey, look at me!" Jiang Cheng said, his heart racing in his chest as Wei Wuxian blinked, and then met his eyes. His brother's pupils were the same size, which was good, but they were wide, too, and he couldn't remember if that was good or bad or irrelevant. "What happened? Are you okay? Are you hurt?"

Wei Wuxian shook his head slightly, and then his cheeks flared red and he ducked his head, bringing his arms up over his face. "Fuck," he whispered, and then he sobbed. "*Fuck!*"

"Wei Wuxian, tell me right now, are you hurt?" Jiang Cheng demanded, and his brother shook his head slightly. A small ripple of relief ran through him, followed by a realisation. He had seen panic look like this before, seen fear make warriors faint clean long after the battle was over. It wasn't anything Jiang Cheng had ever thought of until the war, but he'd had to learn quickly when he became a clan leader. He was just lucky that the first time an attack stole his own breath from him, Jiejie had still been living at Lotus Pier. He lowered his voice. "Did you freak out? About flying? Is that why you fell?"

Wei Wuxian glowered at him, but he was clearly too drained to argue, and Jiang Cheng took a deep breath.

"Right. Okay. We can take a moment, if –"

"No," Wei Wuxian spat, recoiling back. Zizhen's hand fell away from his shoulder as though it burnt, and Wei Wuxian winced slightly. "Jingyi needs a doctor."

There was no arguing with that, but Jiang Cheng still hesitated. Wei Wuxian had flown just fine before, but that was with Lan Wangji and Lan Sizhui and he didn't think bringing that up was a good idea.

"Jiujiu..." Jinling said quietly, in a tone that quite clearly asked 'what are we going to do?' and Jiang Cheng bit back a scream. He didn't know what they were going to do, or how to fix this –

Wei Wuxian gave a horrible, bitter laugh. "Just leave me here. Just –"

"No we're not doing that," Jiang Cheng cut off his brother before he could go any further. "You'll fly behind Jinling – Zizhen can stand behind you and keep a grip on you, and that way if you do pass out again they'll be able to keep you in the air. That, or you cling to my back like a damn monkey, but if you pick that option it'll still be them that'll have to catch you if you fall, because my hands are full."

Theoretically he could, of course, ask Zizhen or Jinling to take Jingyi, but something in him couldn't. He was a little taller and broader than both of them, and he was an adult, and secretly – and most importantly – he didn't want to let go. His (nearly) nephew was injured, and Jiang Cheng hadn't been able to stop it, and he couldn't put him down until he was sure that he was safe.

“We don’t mind, Wei Wuxian,” said Zizhen softly. “Whatever makes you more comfortable.”

“And no one else will ever know” Jinling blurted out. “This never happened.”

Wei Wuxian looked at Jinling, the corner of his mouth twitching a little, and then he closed his eyes. He stood, swaying slightly, and then put a hand tentatively on Jiang Cheng’s shoulder.

“Okay then,” said Jiang Cheng, refusing to register any emotion at his brother feeling safer with him. There was no room in Jiang Cheng’s head or heart to deal with that now. Instead, he let Wei Wuxian lock his arms around his shoulder, feeling his stomach against Jiang Cheng’s back. “You ready?”

Wei Wuxian nodded, and then pressed his face into the back of Jiang Cheng’s shoulder. They rose, slowly and steadily at first, but after a quick check with Zizhen and Jinling, Jiang Cheng sped up again. They couldn’t afford to lose any more time.

Despite what he might have expected, it was strangely comfortable to have his brother so close behind him. Though his grip was iron, Wei Wuxian wasn’t actually leaning his weight on Jiang Cheng, so there wasn’t any extra physical strain, and the extra spiritual power was of little importance when he was running on adrenalin. And when it came from a golden core stronger than any Jiang Cheng would have been able to make himself. Rather than a strain, his brother was a warmth at his back, and it eased just a fraction of Jiang Cheng’s fear to have him so close.

But after a while, Jiang Cheng noticed the movement of Wei Wuxian’s chest against his back become ragged and shaky, and he felt a strange dampness on his shoulder.

“Wei Wuxian?”

“I’m fine,” Wei Wuxian choked, sounding less fine than Jiang Cheng had ever heard him. “I won’t fall.”

“You better not,” Jiang Cheng warned him. He paused. “Tell me. If you get dizzy, or whatever...”

“I will,” Wei Wuxian sniffed. “I’m... I’m sorry, Jiang Cheng.”

“Well, that’s dumb. You’ve done plenty to be sorry about in your life, but I can’t think of anything that needs apologising for now,” Jiang Cheng said, and Wei Wuxian’s arms tightened around him.

For a while, Wei Wuxian said nothing. It was hours, in fact, before he spoke again, his voice so soft and broken it would have been stolen by the wind, if his face wasn’t so close to Jiang Cheng’s ear.

“What if they’re gone forever? Jiang Cheng, I – I don’t – I *can’t*...”

A lump rose in Jiang Cheng’s throat, and tears stung at his eyes. “They’re not.”

“You don’t know that. I can’t – I can’t *find* them. Jiang Cheng, Jiang Cheng, I can’t lose them, I can’t, I *can’t*!”

Jiang Cheng blinked back tears, trying not to wish that A-Jie was here. She would know what to say, how to look after their brother. She’d have words for this things Jiang Cheng couldn’t say, she would be able to comfort Wei Wuxian a thousand times better than he would have. But A-Jie was still an hour away, and Jiang Cheng was all his brother had.

“A-Xian,” he said, his voice sticking in his throat, “I’m with you, okay? Whatever happens, I – I’ll help you. We’ll fix it, okay? I’m here.”

Wei Wuxian let out a low wail, and Jiang Cheng stiffened, wondering what about that was the wrong thing to say. But then his brother hugged him closer, burying his face in Jiang Cheng’s shoulder again. He was still shaking, and it sounded like he was sobbing, but he was clinging so close that maybe Jiang Cheng had done something right.

As the territory below them grew familiar, Jiang Cheng raised his voice to call out. “Jinling, can you send a message ahead to your mother? Give her the short version, let her know we’re coming, and tell her to prepare the doctors.”

“Okay, Jiujiu,” Jinling replied, and hardly a moment later Jiang Cheng saw the golden glitter of a spiritual butterfly disappear into the sky before him.

In his arms, Jingyi groaned, his face twisting tighter in pain, and Jiang Cheng winced. “Hold on, kid,” he murmured, holding him a little closer. “We’re almost there.”

“Is he okay?” Wei Wuxian asked thickly, and Jiang Cheng squashed the urge to wail, ‘I don’t know!’

Instead, he said, “He’s stirring. I think that’s probably a good thing...”

Wei Wuxian said nothing. He was still trembling.

Yanli was waiting for them in the courtyard when they swept down into Lotus Pier. Jiang Cheng stumbled as he landed, utterly exhausted from flying at full speed for most of the day – not to mention the hell that was the middle of it – but he didn’t have the luxury of letting himself fall. Not with Jingyi in his arms and Wei Wuxian on his back.

Luckily, predictably, A-Jie moved at once, taking Wei Wuxian’s arm and pulling him gently away from Jiang Cheng.

“A-Xian,” she whispered, and then she threw her arms around him.

For a moment, Wei Wuxian stiffened, but then he shattered, slumping in A-Jie’s grip and sobbing into her shoulder. Jiang Cheng’s heart hurt. He didn’t know how Wei Wuxian had anymore tears left to cry, or any strength left to stand. Yanli ran her hands over his hair, murmuring softly to him, and as she did, she met Jiang Cheng’s eye, looking meaningfully in the direction of the healers.

“I’ll take him to his room. Go,” she mouthed, and Jiang Cheng nodded gratefully.



With Jinling and Zizhen like silent shadows behind him, he moved as quickly as exhaustion would allow him through Lotus Pier. He could see lights on in the doctors' house, and he didn't bother to knock on the open door before charging inside.

Immediately, he saw Zhou Yuran, the best doctor Lotus Pier had to offer, and by his side was a much younger woman that Jiang Cheng recognised as one of the Wen.

"Zongzhu," said Zhou Yuran, bowing. "Wen Yingyue-"

"I don't care who she is or where she comes from, if she can help she stays if not she needs to make space," said Jiang Cheng, easing Jingyi down onto the bed Zhou Yuran gestured to. "He's in a bad way. Broken ankle, probably broken ribs, there's still a knife in his side – I didn't want to take it out myself – and he's cut up all to hell, some of the cuts are deep –"

"At any point has he stopped breathing?" Zhou Yuran asked, kneeling beside the bed and taking Jingyi's pulse.

"Not that I'm aware of. He was conscious when we got to him."

Zhou Yuran frowned, shifting his grip on Jingyi's wrist, and Jiang Cheng's heart dropped. The doctor was still for a long moment, and Jiang Cheng held his breath. Then, Zhou Yuran shook his head slightly and put Jingyi's wrist down, peeling back his eyelid to study his pupils instead.

"You said he was conscious – was he lucid? Making sense?"

"Yes," said Jiang Cheng, standing back to make space as Wen Yingyue walked past with a bowl of steaming water.

"How long between when he was injured and when you found him? This is the knife, here?" asked Zhou Yuran, peeling away the makeshift bandages around the knife in Jingyi's side.

Jiang Cheng answered the second question first. "Yes. I'm not sure exactly how long – I would guess a few minutes." It had felt like hours they were trapped on the wrong side of those damned wards, hours before they fell and revealed Jingyi alone in the bloodied dirt, but he knew realistically it couldn't have been.

Zhou Yuran hummed. "Very well." He paused, looking up at Jiang Cheng, and Jiang Cheng's stomach twisted. He knew that look – it was the 'respectfully, Jiang-zongzhu, please make yourself scarce before I have to ask you to go' look that the doctors of Lotus Pier had got very good at.

"We will get out of your way," Jiang Cheng said, trying not to sound as reluctant as he felt. "The moment you are finished I wish to be notified – and Jingyi is not to be left alone, not for a single second."

"Understood, Zongzhu," said Zhou Yuran, and Jiang Cheng tore himself away, herding Jinling and Zizhen out with him. They both stopped outside the door, unwilling to go any

further, but as much as Jiang Cheng too wanted to sit outside until the doctors were done, he knew they couldn't stop yet.

"Come on," he said gruffly. "Let's get some food into you both."

"I don't know that I could eat a thing," Zizhen mumbled, and Jiang Cheng put a hand on the boy's shoulder, squeezing it for a moment. Zizhen looked up in surprise.

"Me either, but if we start passing out from hunger or exhaustion we won't be helping anyone. Understood?"

Zizhen nodded. The fear and grief on his face made him look very young, and Jiang Cheng swallowed, thinking about what his brother would do. Then, with a sigh, he put an arm around Zizhen's shoulders, and tugged Jinling close on the other side, and marched them to the kitchens. They were empty, save for a single servant, Liang Su, who looked up as they came in. He bowed, and then turned, taking the lid off a large pot and ladling what smelt like soup into three bowls.

Then, with a bow and without a word, he left them alone, and Jiang Cheng made a note to thank him for it later. He ushered the boys down to a nearby table and put the bowls in front of them, all but forcing spoons into their hands.

For a while, they ate in silence, but then Jinling put down his bowl, still half full, and wrapped his arms around his waist. "Why is it always Jingyi?"

"What?" Jiang Cheng asked, his heart sinking as Zizhen put down his spoon, too.

"He was the one they took when we were in the dungeon and now... It's not fair."

Jiang Cheng sighed heavily. "To be honest, I think it's because it's convenient. When you were in the dungeons it was probably to control Zewu Jun – Jingyi's part of his clan, and his cousin, and his responsibility, but he isn't his *nephew*. Taking you or Sizhui after him would've seemed like an escalation. Today, whatever the fuck that ward was, it was only letting Lans through. If they wanted to control Hanguang Jun, attacking Jingyi or Sizhui would be a good way to do it."

Jinling stared at him in surprise and faint horror, and Jiang Cheng realised the question had probably been rhetorical. However, his attention was quickly snatched by the look on Zizhen's face, because he knew that look far too fucking well.

"It's fucked up," he said gruffly. "And whatever messed up logic is behind it doesn't matter, in the end. It'd be just as bad if it was any of you."

Jinling nodded absently, glaring down at his soup, but Zizhen still had a hint of regret on his face, a shadow of the 'it should have been me,' look. Jiang Cheng poked him.

"Stop thinking that," he ordered.

"Thinking what?" Zizhen asked, and the look on his face was instantly replaced with bewilderment.

“Thinking it would be better if it was you,” Jiang Cheng said firmly. His stomach squirmed uncomfortably at talking so honestly about emotions, but he couldn’t see a way around it. “There’s been more than enough of that going around in this family and it never ends well. So stop it.”

Jinling glanced between Jiang Cheng and Zizhen with wide eyes, and Zizhen pursed his lips tightly, looking away from them both.

“At least if it *was* me my family wouldn’t ever have to know,” Zizhen whispered.

“Yes, we would,” said Jiang Cheng sharply, earning himself another shocked look from both boys. He felt his face burn, and cursed himself for ever thinking it would be a good idea to have a conversation like this without A-Jie or A-Xian. “Just – shut up and eat your soup, both of you.”

Jinling and Zizhen exchanged a glance, but mercifully neither of them said anything, and they obediently returned to eating. Jiang Cheng’s stomach was so twisted that the last thing he wanted to do was eat, but he forced himself to empty his bowl. His spoon was just scraping the bottom of his bowl when a servant came into the room, bowing low.

“Zongzhu, Zhou-yisheng says that Lan-gongzi’s treatment is complete, and you may return now.”

Jinling and Zizhen stood up so quickly they almost upturned the table, and Jiang Cheng followed. He was unsurprised to see Wei Wuxian standing outside the door, one hand tight around Chenqing, the other tucked into Yanli’s arm. He looked more like a ghost than a man – pale as the dead, his eyes red and swollen – and Jiang Cheng strode over quickly, grasping his arm.

“Have you eaten?” he asked, looking at Yanli as he asked.

Wei Wuxian nodded mutely, and Yanli nodded too, her face pinched with sorrow. Then, Wei Wuxian spoke quietly. “Can we go in?”

Jiang Cheng nodded, opening the door and striding inside. Jingyi was still unconscious, but the grimace had smoothed away from his face, and the deepest of his wounds had been bandaged and treated.

“How is he?” Yanli asked quietly, reaching out to run a hand over Jinling’s hair.

“He will survive,” said Zhou Yuran firmly. “And assuming there are no further complications, and he trusts to our orders, there’s no reason he won’t make a full recovery. The break in his ankle is severe – he shouldn’t bear weight on it at all until further notice. As for a timeline, that is difficult to say.” He paused, looking at Jiang Cheng. “His golden core...”

Oh, this was the last thing they needed.

“What’s wrong with it?” Jiang Cheng asked sharply, and Zhou Yuran shook his head.

“Nothing, nothing at all! On the contrary – it is surprisingly strong. When a cultivator experiences injuries of this calibre, usually all their spiritual energy is re-routed to their injuries – thus, the energy held in their golden core depletes. Here, however, his core is re-routing energy to his wounds, but it is also *holding* an immense amount of energy. More than I would have thought possible.”

“Is that a bad thing?” Jiang Cheng asked slowly.

“In truth, I don’t know,” said Zhou Yuran. “At this time I don’t think it presents much of a risk, but I don’t know what has caused it, and holding more energy than you should can be very damaging. At worst, it can lead to qi deviation.”

“Wen Qing said that we had too much spiritual energy,” said Zizhen uncertainly, his hands twisting in his sleeves. “All four of us. Is it that? Because she said she wasn’t worried about it yet... But she did say yet...”

Jinling nodded. “It’s strange, I – I know I shouldn’t be exhausted after flying so far and so fast, but I feel like I could fly through the night and tomorrow too, if I wanted to. I’m tired, so tired, but my core...”

Frowning heavily, Zhou Yuran held out his hand. “May I?” He took Jinling’s pulse, and then Zizhen’s, and his eyes widened.

“What is it, Zhou-yisheng?” Yanli asked, in the closest tone she had to impatience.

“Their cores are much the same as Lan-gongzi’s, though they are holding even more... I have never seen anything like this. Their cores seem stable enough, but the sheer power... Have either of you experienced other symptoms? Irritability, hallucinations, pain, discomfort, paranoia?”

“I don’t think so,” said Zizhen uncertainly.

“Does it count as paranoia if you have a good reason to be paranoid?” asked Jinling tightly, and Zhou Yuran shook his head.

“Then it does seem that there’s no imminent danger... The only thing I can suggest is to continue monitoring you.” He paused. “In regards to Lan Jingyi, I believe he is well enough to be moved to his usual room, if we are careful. We shall continue to monitor and treat him, but he need not be held here overnight.”

“When will he wake up?” Jinling asked in a small voice, and Zhou Yuran gave him a weary smile.

“Not until the morning, I don’t think. We gave him something to help with the pain, but it will likely keep him out until tomorrow.”

“I will take him,” Wei Wuxian said hollowly, and Jiang Cheng winced slightly. His brother looked like a moderate breeze would send him face first into the lotuses, but he wasn’t sure pointing that out would be a good thing.

“May I help?” Zizhen asked softly, and Wei Wuxian closed his eyes. Then, he nodded.

“Jinling and I will get the doors,” said Yanli, and Jiang Cheng nodded, watching as Wei Wuxian and Zizhen carried Jingyi between them. Jiang Cheng paused to thank the doctor, bowing.

“It is my duty, Zongzhu,” said Zhou Yuran, bowing back. He paused. “I would have been much slower without Wen Yingyue’s assistance.”

For the first time, Jiang Cheng looked at the young woman, bowing. “Thank you, Wen Yingyue.”

The woman blushed slightly, shaking her head. “Ah, there is no need, Jiang-zongzhu, please! It is the least I could do after all you have done for us.”

Uncomfortable, Jiang Cheng nodded, and wondered if he could retreat now, but Zhou Yuran was apparently not finished.

“I apprenticed under the doctors of the Qishan Wen,” he said. “Many years ago now.” He laughed softly. “Many, many years ago. It transpires that it was Wen Yingyue’s great-grandmother who was my master. This was long before Wen Ruohan was even born, of course. It is strange, the way that life can circle back in such a way.”

“It is,” Jiang Cheng said, but then a lump grew in his throat. “Thank you both for your service tonight.”

He turned and strode out before the conversation could go any further, moving quickly towards Wei Wuxian’s rooms, but before he could reach them he saw four figures on swords coming down from the sky.

*What now*, he thought, but as they drew closer he recognised them, and felt a strange mix of relief and shock and dread. Jin Zixuan was shooting towards him, and Nie Mingjue and Lan Qiren were flanking him, followed by Nie Huaisang.

“What happened?” Lan Qiren demanded, almost before they had landed. He was almost as pale as Wei Wuxian, and his eyes were strained in a way Jiang Cheng had never seen before. He thought it might be fear.

“How much do you know?” asked Jiang Cheng, a little dumbly. “What are you doing here?”

“Jinling sent me a message,” said Zixuan. “He said that Lan Wangji and Sizhui were kidnapped, that Jingyi was badly injured, and that you were heading back here.”

Jiang Cheng grimaced. “Well, that’s the short version.”

“How did this happen?” demanded Lan Qiren.

Jiang Cheng resolved himself to telling the story as accurately as he could.

“...but as far as I know Jingyi hasn’t woken up yet, so we don’t have any more details,” he finished, and Huaisang groaned, resting his forehead against his brother’s shoulder. Nie Mingjue had been silent since they landed, and now he sighed, closing his eyes.

“Fuck. What the fuck are we supposed to do now?”

“I doubt Jingyi will be able to tell us much more when he wakes, but there may be something...” Zixuan said quietly.

“Jiang-xiong,” Huaisang murmured, and Jiang Cheng caught his eye. There was a strange solemnity in Huaisang’s gaze, and a sympathy that managed not to feel like pity. “Wei-xiong...?”

Jiang Cheng shook his head slightly. “He’s... resting. Or at least I hope he is. He’s...”

“May I see Lan Jingyi?” asked Lan Qiren, and Jiang Cheng blinked, a little surprised by the request. He supposed that Jingyi was a member of the inner family of the Lan clan, that it made sense Lan Qiren would want to see him.

“If Wei Wuxian doesn’t mind,” he said, and then at the look on his face he elaborated quickly. “For the time being Jingyi and Sizhui have been sleeping in Wei Wuxian’s rooms. My brother is...” He struggled for the right words.

“Of course he is,” said Huaisang quietly. “Lan Sizhui is his son. It’s a wonder he was able to stay upright to fly back.”

Jiang Cheng nodded gratefully, ignoring the fact that Wei Wuxian hadn’t actually managed that. He looked at Lan Qiren who closed his eyes, and then nodded.

“Very well,” he said, and he sounded exhausted. “If Wei Wuxian does not wish to be disturbed I will wait until the morning.”

Jiang Cheng bowed low. “Thank you, Lan-xiansheng.”

Mercifully, Jianyu was close enough to find in a matter of moments, though he looked somewhat distressed at the concept of trying to find appropriate guest rooms for Nie Mingjue, Nie Huaisang, and Lan Qiren among all their other visitors.

“We know you’re a little full right now,” said Huaisang wearily. “We won’t be offended by tiny guest rooms. Da-ge and I can share. And I doubt we’ll be doing much sleeping, anyway. Do you have a library, Jiang-xiong?”

Jiang Cheng nodded, a little defensiveness creeping up his spine. “It is as well stocked as it was before the war,” he said, not adding that it had never quite had the scope of the library at Cloud Recesses. He did, however, add, “All of Wei Wuxian’s notes are there. The books you took from Jin Guangyao’s rooms, too.” Wei Wuxian, of course, had left them strewn across the workroom, but Yanli had tidied up.

Nie Huaisang nodded. “We should start there, Da-ge. We should do something...”

“I will join you there when I have seen to Lan Jingyi,” said Lan Qiren, and Jianyu bowed.

“Very well. This way, Nie-zongzhu, Nie-gongzi.”

Sighing, Jiang Cheng scrounged up as much energy as he could to remember his manners, and led Lan Qiren to Wei Wuxian’s rooms. Jin Zixuan followed them, but Jiang Cheng didn’t mind. Especially not when Zixuan, like Lan Qiren, waited at the door without being asked to when Jiang Cheng strode inside.

Lan Jingyi had been settled into bed, and Zizhen and Jinling were both sat beside him. Jinling’s knees were tucked up to his chest, and Zizhen’s hands had disappeared entirely into his sleeve. Wei Wuxian was sitting on the edge of his own bed, his face in his hands and Yanli at his side. She was murmuring quietly to him, but stopped as Jiang Cheng came in.

Jiang Cheng cleared his throat. “We’ve got visitors. Apparently someone sent a message to his father.”

Jinling went a little red, his chin jutting up defensively. “I’m not sorry!”

“Did I ask you to be?” Jiang Cheng asked, too tired even to snap. He looked back at Wei Wuxian. “Lan Qiren wants to see Jingyi. I said I’d ask you before I let him in.”

Wei Wuxian shook his head slightly, not even moving it out of his hands. “If he wants to. I don’t care.”

Jiang Cheng nodded, and Yanli caught his eye, nodding meaningfully towards Zizhen and Jinling, and then mouthing, “A-Xuan?” Jiang Cheng nodded again, leaning out to invite Lan Qiren and Zixuan inside.

“Do you think you could wrangle Jinling and Zizhen into bed? Jinling’s been sleeping in Yanli’s rooms, I think there’s another spare bed there, but –”

“I will sort it,” promised Zixuan, and a tiny slither of weight eased from Jiang Cheng’s shoulders. He watched as Lan Qiren stepped carefully through the room, looking at Wei Wuxian and then averting his gaze with an expression that looked almost like pain. He stood beside Jingyi’s bed, and Zizhen scrambled to his feet, getting out of the way.

Zixuan moved over towards him, helping Jinling up too. “Come on,” he murmured, putting a hand on Zizhen’s shoulder. “You need to rest. He will be here in the morning. Come on.”

Reluctantly, the two boys allowed themselves to be steered away. Lan Qiren said nothing, staring down at Lan Jingyi with an expression Jiang Cheng could not read. Instead of bothering to try, he sat beside his brother, close enough that their shoulders touched. Wei Wuxian hardly seemed to notice.

Eventually, Lan Qiren turned around, and to Jiang Cheng’s surprise, it looked strangely like the man was going to cry.

“I will take my leave, and assist Nie-zongzhu and Nie-gongzi in the library. With your leave, Jiang-zongzhu, I have no need of an escort.”

Jiang Cheng could do little more than nod numbly, and Lan Qiren walked away, closing the door behind him. A few moments after the door closed, Wei Wuxian spoke in a horrible, hollow voice.

“Shijie... I need to go to the library, or – or –”

Jiang Cheng opened his mouth to forbid it, but Yanli spoke before he could. “A-Xian, if you went into the library, where would you start? What would you look at first?”

“I – I –”

“Please trust me, A-Xian,” she said softly, stroking a hand through his hair. “For tonight, just get some sleep. Tomorrow, we will search through the library with you, we will do *everything* we can, but you must rest. Please – for your Shijie?”

“Shijie, how could I sleep? Sizhui – Sizhui was stabbed, they *stabbed* him, Shijie, and – and Lan Zhan – Lan Zhan – Jin Guangyao, he wants – he wants to take Lan Zhan’s core, I know he does, and if – if he threatens Sizhui Lan Zhan, Lan Zhan will agree, and they’ll – they’ll –” Wei Wuxian’s voice broke, and he let out a harsh wail. “Shijie, it hurts *so* much, it – Lan Zhan – Lan Zhan –”

“I’m sorry, A-Xian,” Yanli murmured, pulling him close to her chest. “I’m so sorry.”

“How could I sleep?” he sobbed bitterly. “How – how –?”

“Don’t try to sleep,” said Yanli, sounding like her heart was breaking. “Just close your eyes for a few minutes, please? For Jiejie?”

Sobbing, Wei Wuxian slumped against their sister, and she carefully guided him down into her lap, stroking his hair. Feeling utterly useless, Jiang Cheng reached out hesitantly and patted his brother’s hand. With another wretched sob, Wei Wuxian grabbed Jiang Cheng’s hand so hard it hurt.

For a long time, they sat there in silence, until eventually Wei Wuxian’s breathing evening out, and his grip on Jiang Cheng’s hand eased a little.

“Is... is he asleep?” Jiang Cheng asked quietly, and Yanli nodded, glancing at him. Her face was streaming with tears, and her lips were quivering slightly.

“A-Cheng,” she whispered, “he... I don’t how he’ll get through this, if we don’t find them... If it was A-Ling and A-Xuan, I – I can’t even *imagine* it, A-Cheng, it hurts too much to even try.”

Jiang Cheng had to swallow twice before he was able to speak. “He... he’d still have us...” It felt like a weak answer and A-Jie’s face crumpled further into heartache.

“Yes,” she murmured, “but Sizhui is his *son*. And Lan Wangji... we have to find them, A-Cheng.”



“How?” he choked, the helplessness that had been stuck in his chest all day breaking free.  
“How, A-Jie?”

She shook her head. “I don’t know. I don’t know, but...”

Jiang Cheng took a deep breath. “A-Yuan – A-Yuan’s still alright, isn’t he? He’s still safe?”

“Yes, he’s in the children’s hall. Wen Ning and his Popo are with him.” Yanli paused, looking down at Wei Wuxian. “He couldn’t see him. A-Yuan. I asked if – but he... he didn’t want A-Yuan to see him like this, and also it – I’m sure it would hurt as much as it helped to see him now, with Sizhui gone...” She paused again, her gaze rising, this time, to Jiang Cheng. “A-Cheng... you need to rest, too. You are exhausted.”

Jiang Cheng didn’t bother arguing. “I won’t leave him tonight,” he said, and A-Jie gave a watery smile and nodded.

“I would stay too, but Rulan will need feeding soon,” she said. “And I need to check on A-Ling, and Zizhen.”

Jiang Cheng nodded. “I’ve got him.”

Carefully, she stood up, easing Wei Wuxian onto the bed and, with Jiang Cheng’s help, under the covers. Their hands still tangled, Jiang Cheng laid down beside his brother as Yanli kissed both of their foreheads like they were children, and then left the room.

It took a while, but eventually Jiang Cheng fell asleep, with his brother’s hand in his, and the weight of the world on his heart.

## Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed this chapter, please do let me know what you think! Until next time, please do take care!

# Chapter 30

## Chapter Notes

Hi everyone! I can't believe this story has 700 comments - thank you all so much! I'm so glad you're enjoying this story, and I hope you enjoy this chapter!

A COUPLE OF QUICK NOTES: In terms of Chinese, I use the Chinese name 'lingchi' for slow slicing which is an ancient Chinese torture/execution technique and is how Xue Yang killed Chang Ping in canon. Also, I chose the name Xidi for the village at random after spending way too long looking at maps, so please let me know if this is, for any reason, inappropriate or a mistake.

Secondly, outside of having watched 'The Untamed' several times through, I know very little about the concept of cultivation, so the medical cultivation in here (and also aspects like how fast a sword can get you from a to b) is as best as I can make it, but also admittedly a little squished into what works for the plot. If anything sticks out to you as wrong/offensive/just plain nonsense, please do let me know!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Wen Qing hadn't expected Jin Guangyao to request that she see to Zewu Jun. It was strange, to see a man so powerful lying so still and silent before her, utterly helpless. Of course, even if she wanted to, even now Wen Qing could pose no threat to Lan Xichen. There were four guards in the room, all with their blades at the ready, and Jin Guangyao stood by the head of Zewu Jun's bed, watching her every move.

A part of her had to admit that it was clever, using the particular poison that he had. It was a one she had used herself once or twice for operations, when it was vital to keep the patient still as well as unconscious for a considerable length of time, but it was never her first choice. It was always an unpleasant and uncomfortable drug, and those who'd received it always took a while to regain control of their body afterwards, which added unnecessary stress, post-surgery.

She had never seen it used to keep a person sedated long term, and she told Jin Guangyao as much.

"That is not your concern, Wen-yisheng," he said softly. "But anything you can do to ease his discomfort – without negating the effects of the medicine – would be appreciated."

So Wen Qing had set to work, using a few well-placed needles to reduce any pain Lan Xichen may be feeling, and as the grimace on his face smoothed out, Jin Guangyao relaxed.

And so, her heart racing as fast as fragile as a butterfly's wings, Wen Qing had gone further. Without the antidote, there was nothing she could do to free Lan Xichen completely. But she

could lessen the poison's potency – she could bring him closer to consciousness. Infusing her qi through her needles, she sent energy carefully through his meridians, coaxing his spiritual energy into moving to attack the poison. It would take hours, if not days, to fully take effect, especially if someone administered a top up dose, and it would depend on Lan Xichen's own strength and will as to when he would wake, but for now, it was all she could do.

“His sleep will be fuller,” she said. “There will be no more discomfort. Make sure he is being moved often enough, or he will develop bedsores, and –”

There was a rapid knock on the door, and Jin Guangyao held up his hand. Wen Qing fell silent, watching as he walked to the door and stepped outside. One of the guards in the room levelled his sword at Wen Qing's throat, and she glared at him. There was a brief pause, and then Jin Guangyao called, “Wen-guniang, come, now.”

Wen Qing bit back her anger – this was not the first time she had been treated like a dog, and Mo Xuanyu's wellbeing depended on her cooperation. She stepped outside quickly, to find Jin Guangyao already moving down the hall.

“Quickly,” he said, his voice sharp. “Believe me, Wen-guniang, you do not want to delay.”

A sense of dread began to creep up Wen Qing's spine, and she picked up speed to follow him. The shackles had been removed from her wrists so that she could work, but there were still chains around her legs, making it impossible to run. Still, she moved as fast as she could, following Jin Guangyao into a small, well-lit room that had clearly been dressed as a doctor's study. There was a small apothecary against one wall, as well as a small kitchen and a raised bed, where a white-robed man was putting down a smaller, bloodied body.

And Wen Qing's blood ran cold as she recognised the weak, terrified voice sobbing from the bed.

“Baba – Baba –”

“Sizhui!” The cry tore from her throat before she could help it, and the boy turned his head towards her. His eyes were hazy and unfocused, swimming with tears and drowning in terror, and she could see his chest rising far too quickly, too shallowly.

“Stabilise him,” Jin Guangyao ordered, and Wen Qing was moving before he'd finished speaking.

She all but fell against the side of the bed, putting a hand on Sizhui's forehead and smoothing his hair back as she pressed the fingers of her other hand into his wrist. His pulse thrummed frail beneath her fingers, alarmingly weak and desperately fast, but in an inexplicable contrast his spiritual energy was surging, coursing through his body like a lightning storm. It was dangerously unsteady, but she could feel it trying to keep him alive, and as such it fell down her list of priorities.

“A-Yuan, can you hear me?” she asked calmly, her voice steady despite the fear beating at her chest. “Do you know who I am?”

“Q-Qing-jie,” Sizhui stammered, grappling weakly for her hand with bloodied fingers. Even in the span of a broken word, his voice was utterly terrified. “Qing-jie...”

“That’s right,” she said soothingly, her eyes moving down to a poorly tied bandage around his stomach. It was soaked and red, and her jaw clenched as her hands moved towards it. “I’m here, A-Yuan, you’re going to be fine. What happened?”

“He was stabbed,” said the man who had put Sizhui down on the bed, his voice almost smug. He was still standing nearby, and when Sizhui glanced towards him he whimpered, his already panicked breathing growing quicker and shallower.

Fury lashed through Wen Qing, and she moved to untie the bandages, sparing a half-second to glare at the man. He was vaguely familiar, but she couldn’t care less about that.

“Please back away from my patient,” she said, her voice trembling with the effort not to snarl or shout. “Scaring him will not help me.”

The man scoffed, but Jin Guangyao chided him softly.

“Minshan. Go and assist Chengmei.”

Wen Qing didn’t look up to see whether or not the man went. She was already too busy, peeling away the sodden bandages and torn robes to reveal a wound that made her own stomach clench. Sizhui hadn’t just been stabbed – he had been run through. There would be damage to his organs, severe damage, and unless she was very much mistaken the wound had torn all the way through him. If he were not a cultivator, Sizhui would already be dead. Even now, he was fading.

An image of her brother flashed in Wen Qing’s mind, of A-Ning’s cold and lifeless body, the flagpole protruding from his stomach scarcely an inch away from where Sizhui, too had been impaled. She gritted her teeth, and locked the image away.

She had been too late to help A-Ning, but she was not too late to help A-Yuan. Not yet.

In a single mercy, the bleeding had slowed – she could see remnants of a powdered medicine around the wound that she doubtless had to thank for that.

“I need needles,” she said, and in scarcely more than a second a set was placed beside her. As swiftly and suddenly as though she had been struck by a needle herself, Wen Qing felt a heightened focus, a practised calm, and she breathed in deeply. She was a doctor. She was the best doctor of the Qishan Wen sect.

She could do this.

Somehow, Sizhui remained mostly awake as she worked, sometimes drifting in and out but ultimately clinging to consciousness with the stubborn bravery of his fathers. When she could, Wen Qing spoke to him gently. There was little she could offer in the way of comfort, but she told him how well she was doing, how proud she was. More often than not, though,

she could not afford to talk at all. It was never wise to perform surgery with divided attention, especially when you hadn't had even a minute to prepare for it.

It took hours. Hours upon hours, and every ounce of her skill as both a doctor and a cultivator to patch up the internal damage. It was with exhaustion and blood-soaked hands that Wen Qing was finally able to address the entrance wound, sewing it up as neatly as she could. Even then, she could not rest, and to her disdain, she had to ask the guards for help to ease Sizhui onto his stomach so she could tend the exit wound on his back. He whimpered at the guard's touch, and Wen Qing hated every one of them with a fierce passion, but she couldn't do it on her own. She had to ask them to move him again afterwards, to get him onto his back again, and he made a soft noise of pain then, too.

"It's alright, A-Yuan. You're okay, now," she promised, squeezing his hand gently for a moment before pressing her fingers to his wrist. With her needles, she'd been able to guide his qi to the wound, into healing, and the crazed desperation she had felt before had fallen away but there was still far too much spiritual energy within him, and she pursed her lips. It had been days now, since the ritual – she would have expected residual energy to have subsided, but she hadn't had a chance to speak with Wei Wuxian about it.

She shifted her grip, preparing to explore his qi further, but then Jin Guangyao spoke sharply.

"That is enough."

She froze, her hand around Sizhui's. "What do you mean, that is enough?"

"I mean, you have done your job. I told you to stabilise him – he is stable. In fact, it looks like you've already done more than simply stabilising him. So now, back away."

Sizhui choked slightly, and she could feel his heartbeat stutter beneath her fingers. Even if she'd had no fear of her own, Sizhui's would have been enough to spur her heart, and Wen Qing steeled herself.

"Jin-gongzi, there is more I can do for him. Please, let me stay a while longer. I don't know what you want from him, but he can do nothing for you in a state like this, and –"

"Wen-guniang," said Jin Guangyao, smiling cordially. "The more vulnerable Lan Sizhui is, the more use he is to me. But don't worry – as soon as you have completed the transplant, you and Lan Sizhui and Xiao-Xuanyu will all be free. You will be delivered safely to Lotus Pier. As long as you do as I say."

Wen Qing pursed her lips for a moment to make sure they couldn't tremble. "If you want to take Sizhui's golden core –"

Jin Guangyao laughed. "Oh, no. If that was our intention I wouldn't risk damage coming to it. No, no. Lan Sizhui is just a little insurance. To make sure our donor is fully willing."

Wen Qing felt very cold, and Sizhui sobbed weakly.

“No, no...” His voice was so quiet, but it struck Wen Qing like a physical blow. “N-not Baba, not Baba, *please...*”

Hanguang Jun. Jin Guangyao wanted to take Hanguang Jun’s golden core – he wanted *Wen Qing* to slice Lan Wangji open, to destroy the Second Jade of Lan, the man Wei Wuxian loved so much...

“Unfortunately, Lan Wangji will be unable to return with you,” said Jin Guangyao lightly. “But the rest of you will be home soon enough.”

“No,” Sizhui begged, and Wen Qing swallowed, squeezing his fingers and running her other hand over his hair. He was staring desperately at Jin Guangyao, tears spilling down his cheeks, and he started shivering as he sobbed again. “Please, please d-don’t kill him – please, *please...*”

“It is time for you to return to your room, Wen-guniang. Though first you may clean up, of course,” said Jin Guangyao. One of the guards lurking at the back of the room seized her arm, dragging her away from her cousin.

“Qing-jie...” Sizhui choked, but Wen Qing couldn’t let herself call back. If she did, her call would become a sob, and she would break. She couldn’t break. Not yet.

Still, her heart cringed as she was shoved out of the room and back down the hall, the guard’s hand painfully tight around her arm, the sound of Sizhui’s sobs fading behind her.

“Ah,” sighed the guard, and the hair on the back of Wen Qing’s neck stood up. “He just begs *beautifully*, doesn’t he?”

“Xue Yang,” she said, and the young man laughed, his fingers digging deeper into her arm.

“You remembered! It’s been so long since Qishan. I wasn’t sure that you would recognise me.”

Wen Qing did not dignify that with a response. She was utterly exhausted, and coming up with any worthwhile reply seemed as easy as climbing a ladder to the moon. Xue Yang did not seem overly concerned with her silence. He whistled to himself as he forced her into a small washroom, and then he let her go, leaning casually against the wall by the door and waving a hand blithely towards a bowl of clean water that had been set out on a small table.

“Clean up, if you want to,” he said, before continuing to whistle.

Doing her best to ignore him, Wen Qing plunged her hands into the water. It was cold, but she was too tired to think about heating it herself, though she knew that would be more pleasant. She held in a shudder, and grabbed a nearby bar of soap, scrubbing fiercely at her hands until the soap and water both turned pink, and then red. By the time she was finished, her hands were also pink and cold, but they were clean.

“Are you done?” asked Xue Yang, and she rose to her feet. Xue Yang grinned. “What, are you not talking to me, Wen Qing?”

She said nothing, and he pouted, eyes shimmering with malice.

“So rude. I’m hurt, I really am.”

She wished that he was, that there was something – anything – she could do to hurt him, but there wasn’t, and they both knew it. If she wanted to keep Sizhui and Mo Xuanyu as safe as possible, she had to behave. Of course, that didn’t mean she had to be polite. Wen Qing kept her mouth shut.

With a snort, Xue Yang grabbed her arm again, pushing her out of the room and across the barren courtyard. Wherever they were, Wen Qing’s best guess was that it was an abandoned gentry house – the rooms where Lan Xichen and Sizhui were being kept would be pleasant enough in other circumstances, but the garden was overgrown and abandoned, and she had seen no one but armed guards. The first door to the dungeons had only a very simple lock, but Wen Qing knew better than to find that a relief. Behind that door there was a great, long corridor, twisting and turning as it cut down into the earth, underground. At the end of it, she knew, there was a great wooden door reinforced with chains and talismans, and even behind that was the barred door of the cell. There was no way out. She knew it.

She held her head high as they neared the door, and Xue Yang scoffed.

“Ah yes, that will fool me,” he said. “Wen Qing is very brave.” He grinned, twisting her around so that she was facing him, and then he took a step closer to her.

She said nothing, and Xue Yang’s smile grew wider, and colder.

“We’ll see how long you’re able to keep quiet. When Jin-gongzi’s finished with you, it’s my turn. I’ve been *dying* to try my hand at lingchi. That would give you plenty of time to scream.”

Wen Qing looked sharply at him. “Oh? Then It appeared Jin-gongzi has given us differing accounts as to what will happen when the surgery is complete.”

She knew at once she’d made a mistake – Xue Yang’s eyes lit up as she spoke, and his smile bared more teeth. “Do you honestly think he’ll let you go?”

“I expect nothing,” said Wen Qing, looking straight ahead and trying to maintain her composure. “But besides malice, he has no reason not to. I am aware of none of his plans. I am not even aware of where we are.” Wen Qing cursed the words as soon as they came out of her mouth, but it was too late.

Xue Yang gave a gasp of a laugh, and then shook his head, giving a mocking bow. “Oh, I can help with that, Qing-guniang! We’re in the mountains of south-west Qishan, two miles east of a village called Xidi. Do you think that’s enough information? Do you think it’s enough for him to let me kill you? Or should I tell you more?”

Wen Qing looked away, and clenched her jaw. Xue Yang laughed, shaking his head as he opened the large wooden door, and shoved Wen Qing inside. Her eyes widened.

Mo Xuanyu was still in the cell, tucked into a tiny ball in one corner, his eyes wide and wary as they flickered between the door, and something on the other side of the cell.

Something. Someone. Meng Yao.

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By the time Lan Wangji was free of the talisman, it was too late. His wrists and ankles were already in shackles, each chained individually to the wall behind him. The door to the cell was already locked, and Xue Yang was already walking away.

Sizhui was already gone.

Wangji had thought himself terrified before, but now – now, somehow it was even worse. He could still hear Sizhui’s cries in his mind, he could still hear his desperate sobs of “Baba” grow weaker and weaker, until they faded altogether. With all his heart, Wangji prayed that it had only been the distance that made them fade, that Sizhui was still –

That he wasn’t –

Vaguely, Wangji was aware that he was crying, or at least that there were tears on his cheeks. He wasn’t sure if he would be able to sob if he tried. He had control of his body back, and the chains around his hands and feet were long enough to allow for some movement, but every part of him felt cold, and numb, as though the terror had occupied his entire being, and left room for nothing else. The logical part of his mind suggested meditating, but logic had never felt so far away. Everything felt so far away.

Sizhui was so far away.

The cell was so small. There wasn’t enough space within it for a person to lie down, and had Wangji decided to take a meditation pose, his knees would have been pressed against the side walls. They would have been now, too, if Wangji’s knees hadn’t crept up towards his chest in a way they hadn’t since he was five years old, and Shufu told him it was forbidden to sit improperly. His shoulders were hunched, and his head bowed, and there was no strength within him to fix it.

Su She had said that Jin Guangyao didn’t want Sizhui dead ‘yet.’

What was yet? *When* was yet?

Was ‘yet’ now?

Was Sizhui already gone?

Distantly, a part of Wangji wondered at how overwhelming this agony was. The frail voice of logic couldn’t understand it – he had known Sizhui for less than a week, he had known his son for scarcely five days, and that shouldn’t be enough time to make the threat of his death enough to shatter Wangji’s entire world. But it was. Because in his heart, it didn’t matter that he barely knew Sizhui, or that the Lan Wangji who had raised him was just a memory – Sizhui was his son, and the love that came with that had become stronger than stone, growing



faster than Wangji would have ever thought possible. It was a love so deep that Wangji was sure he would never understand it – it was the love he had heard new parents speak of when describing the moment of their child’s birth, a love that changed the world in an instant. Silently, Wangji had always thought such claims ridiculous. Now, he knew their truth ran as deep as the roots of the mountains.

Sizhui was his *son*, and he had changed *everything*, and if he was gone, if he was *dead* – Wangji couldn’t *breathe*.

He heard the turn of a key in a lock. He raised his head.

From where he was sitting, he could see two doors. The first was the door to the cell – unlike the stone walls of the cell, it was made of iron bars. Through that, he could see the second door – a door built of dark, red-stained wood. From this door hung several hooks, each bearing instruments that could only be designed for torture. They looked pitiful to Lan Wangji, now. He couldn’t imagine that any of them would be able to conjure a pain worse than this.

The wooden door opened, and Wangji rose, his posture perfect, his head high. His heart racing. His jaw clenched.

Jin Guangyao walked in through the door, and the loathing that surged within Wangji was almost strong enough to rival the pain. Almost.

He made no effort to hide the hatred, or his rage, and he bit out the only words that mattered before Jin Guangyao could open his wretched mouth.

“Where is Sizhui?”

Jin Guangyao smiled, and it felt like a hundred rats were racing down Wangji’s spine. He did not shiver. “He is resting. I thought you would like to know that Wen Qing has seen to him, and that he is in no immediate danger of death – not from his wound, at least.”

For a moment, Wangji couldn’t breathe. It was all he could do not to crumple to the ground, to crash under the weight of the relief. Sizhui was alive. He was *alive*, and if Wen Qing had seen him then there was every chance he would stay that way – and then Wangji breathed in sharply as the rest of Jin Guangyao’s words set in. *Not from his wound* – Jin Guangyao was threatening his son, threatening to kill him, and that was if he wasn’t lying now –

Glancing at the ceiling, Jin Guangyao gave a soft laugh and shook his head, but it didn’t seem to be a reaction to Wangji’s renewed anger. His smile had turned wry, reflective, though no less chilling. “Funnily enough, he’s in the room I offered to Er-ge, the first time we were here. Er-ge refused to take it. He said if his nephew and his cousin were to be in the dungeons, that was where he and you belonged. You were unconscious at the time, of course, and I said that the room would be more comfortable for you, but Er-ge was insistent that it was what you would want.”

Lan Wangji clenched his teeth. The word ‘Er-ge’ coming from Jin Guangyao’s lips was ash in his ears, acid in his gut – after everything the despicable snake of a man had done, he had *no* right to call Xiongzhong his brother.

Jin Guangyao looked back at him, and folded his hands in front of him. He sighed, and then shook his head again. “Truthfully,” he said, “I’d have preferred not to involve you in any of this. For Er-ge’s sake. He is very fond of you.” His tone was warm, condescending, as though it was generous of him to say that Xiongzhong was ‘fond’ of Wangji.

He was not ‘fond.’ There were few things in life that Lan Wangji now knew with utter certainty, and there was nothing he had known longer or doubted less – Xiongzhong loved him. Xiongzhong would never leave him. Not willingly.

Lan Wangji said nothing.

Jin Guangyao sighed. “Unfortunately, of course, that’s part of the problem. Regretfully, Lan Wangji, Er-ge could never be happy if he thought he’d abandoned you. It will be much easier to have a clean break of things. Which brings us to why you are here. I have no golden core.”

*I know*, Wangji thought, but a cold dread was seeping into his heart.

“You,” said Jin Guangyao, with no trace of a smile, “are going to give me yours.”

“I will not.” The words came out hard and cold, and Jin Guangyao nodded.

“I understand that it is difficult to accept. I think we’re past the point of pretty words or riddles. You are going to give me your golden core, willingly, and I am going to spare your son.”

Understanding dawned in Wangji in an instant, and he felt his body stiffen.

“If you refuse, I will bring Lan Sizhui here, to you,” said Jin Guangyao calmly. “And I will bring Xue Yang. I believe he is keen to try his hand at lingchi. I know for a fact that he has the capacity to do it, and to make the death last hours. Maybe days. Of course, Lan Sizhui is already injured – it is doubtful he would last days. But make no mistake of it – if you refuse me, Xue Yang will cut and slice at your son a thousand times or more, until there is no blood left in his body, and no strength left in his heart, and you will watch. Every last second.” Despite his best effort, Lan Wangji could feel his hands trembling, and Jin Guangyao took a step closer. “You will watch, and you will be able to do nothing. You will hear him scream for you, hear him beg and plead and cry until his throat is so raw he can no longer speak. You will hear, and you will do nothing, and you will watch.”

Already, Lan Wangji could hear it in his mind, and he clenched his hands into fists, glaring down at the floor.

“If I agreed...?” he said quietly, and he could practically hear Jin Guangyao smiling.

“Then as soon as I have recovered from the surgery, I will see Lan Sizhui, Wen Qing, and Mo Xuanyu safely returned to Lotus Pier. You have my word.”

“And Xichen?”

“Er-ge will come with me. After hearing of the treachery of the cultivation world, and the murder of his dear little brother, it will not be too hard to convince him that the best thing to do is run away.”

Lan Wangji’s eyes narrowed, and he looked back at Jin Guangyao. “He is not a fool.”

“No, he is not,” said Jin Guangyao agreeably. “However, I have seen what he looks like when your life is on the line, Lan Wangji. I am confident that when he is presented with your corpse, he will not be difficult to sway. Besides, Er-ge does not like to ask questions when he does not think he would like the answer.”

It was true – it was true and Wangji knew it, and his heart plummeted down so far he thought it might never stop falling.

He was going to die here.

He was going to die, and his death was going to be the reason his brother disappeared from the world. He was going to die, and the best he could hope for was that his son would not be slaughtered beside him.

And before he died, Jin Guangyao was going to steal his golden core.

He could not even ask for proof that Jin Guangyao would uphold his end of the deal. There was none, and there could be none, and they both knew it.

“So, are you going to cooperate, Lan Wangji?”

What choice did he have? He could not let Xue Yang touch Sizhui – he couldn’t. If his core was the price to pay, if his life was the price to pay...

“I want to see them,” he said, fighting to keep his voice even.

“What?”

Wangji’s resolve tightened. “I will do it – I will let you take my core – *if* I can see Sizhui, and Xiongzhong, before.”

Jin Guangyao stared at him carefully. “You may see Lan Sizhui. As for Er-ge...” He paused for a long moment, studying Wangji intently. Then, he smiled – in an expression Lan Wangji would once have described as kind. “You may *see* Er-ge. But you will not speak with him. He will not be conscious.”

Lan Wangji closed his eyes. He couldn’t help it. Then, he gave a single nod.

“Thank you for your cooperation, Hanguang Jun,” said Jin Guangyao. “Now, I shall let you rest. Tomorrow, we shall perform the operation. Is there anything in particular you would like to eat, for this evening?”

Lan Wangji did not move. He would not let himself move. He heard Jin Guangyao sigh, and then his footsteps departed. He heard the door open.

“Farewell, Hanguang Jun. I look forward to seeing you tomorrow.”

Lan Wangji heard Jin Guangyao leave, and he heard the door close behind him.

Then, and only then, did Lan Wangji let out the breath he’d been holding. He let his head drop down, just a fraction, and then he felt his shoulders shake.

Tomorrow.

It was going to happen *tomorrow*. He thought of Sizhui and Xiongzhong and Wei Ying, of the grief they would endure when he was gone. He thought of Shufu, who would be left alone to run Gusu Lan, who would never learn what happened to Xichen, and Lu Meilin and Lan Liqin, and the others among their family who would mourn if he was gone.

He thought of Wei Ying, Wei Ying who loved him, who was *his* – he thought of Wei Ying and it hurt, and he hid his face in his hands like a child. The chains on his wrists jangled as he moved, and a shiver ran down his spine.

Quite suddenly, he felt very small, and very young. Tears stung at the back of his eyes, and he squeezed his eyes shut tightly. He would not cry. Not for himself. He couldn’t.

He wanted Xiongzhong.

He wanted Wei Ying.

He wanted his family.

He did not want to die.

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When Wen Qing woke, it didn’t feel like morning. There were no windows in the cell, and no way to track the time, so she couldn’t know for sure, but if she had to guess she would put the hour before dawn. Of course, that could simply be due to exhaustion. Wen Qing had rarely felt so drained in her life, and only once before had she felt so hopeless.

She felt the sting of tears in the back of her eyes, and she sighed, sitting up carefully. Mo Xuanyu was asleep in her lap, his little fists clenched around her skirts. She wasn’t sure that was the best idea – she knew there must still be blood on her clothes – but she couldn’t bring herself to shift him. He looked peaceful in sleep, unafraid. He deserved to be unafraid as long as possible. She felt an urge to stroke his hair, but she couldn’t – once again, her wrists had been shackled, and chained to the wall behind her. Much of her body ached from the position, but the pain seemed so insignificant.

Because Jin Guangyao had told her to get some sleep before the surgery tomorrow. Now, tomorrow was today, or at least it was getting that way.

Wen Qing let her head drop back against the wall, breathing in deeply in an effort to get control over herself. Her eyes flickered to the other side of the cell, where Meng Yao was chained to the wall. He was unconscious, and had been the entire time she had seen him – more or less. At times he had stirred, making quiet sounds of discomfort or fear and twitching or shaking against the ground, but he hadn't woken. His pale skin was covered in a sheen of sweat, and one of his hands was bandaged – and by the looks of it, missing a finger. Clearly, like Lan Xichen, he was being drugged, but Wen Qing doubted very much it was the same poison. It seemed Jin Guangyao cared much less for his past self than he did Zewu Jun.

Poor Mo Xuanyu had been more than a little bewildered by his introduction to Meng Yao. He hadn't moved from his corner when Xue Yang was in the cell, chaining Wen Qing to the wall again, but as soon as the man had left he had sprung to her side, asking in a trembling whimper what was happening, and why were there two of them, and was Meng Yao going to hurt them?

She'd comforted him as best she could, though she hadn't mentioned the time travel aspect of things, saying instead that they were twins – that Meng Yao could well be dangerous, but for now he was unconscious, and as yet not a threat.

"Has he done bad things, too?" Mo Xuanyu had whispered, and Wen Qing thought of Qiongqi Pass, and the ambush of her brothers, and she had nodded.

Meng Yao did not look evil at all, now. Wen Qing knew better than to trust her eyes on such matters, that evil could take many faces, but still – unconscious and chained and trembling, Meng Yao looked vulnerable. Almost innocent.

And Wen Qing hated him. She hated every part of Jin Guangyao and Meng Yao with an intensity that made her sick, and she felt tears rise up to block her throat. She clenched her teeth and squeezed her eyes shut, refusing to let them fall.

But when she closed her eyes, she thought of what today threatened to bring, and she thought of Lan Wangji walking back into the Demon Subdue Palace hand in hand with Wei Wuxian, a small, shy smile on his face. She thought of the way Wei Wuxian had beamed, how happy he looked, and she pursed her lips together, trying to hold back a sob.

Wen Qing knew that she would never forgive herself for cutting the core from Lan Wangji, and she knew Wei Wuxian never would, either. He was too good a person to kill her for it – he might accept that she had no choice, might even acknowledge that it was the only way she could protect Sizhui and Xuanyu, but he would never forgive her.

"Qing-jie?" Xuanyu mumbled, and Wen Qing opened her eyes. She was breathing heavily, on the edge of breaking down entirely, and Mo Xuanyu was sitting up, rubbing at his eyes. She cursed herself.

"It's alright, Xuanyu," she murmured, trying to smile. "I'm sorry I woke you. Go back to sleep."

But Xuanyu stared at her warily, biting at his lip. He glanced over at Meng Yao, and his hands curled into tiny fists. "Did he do something bad?"

Wen Qing shook her head. “No, sweetheart. No. I am just... a little overwhelmed. But it’s alright – everything is going to be okay.”

Mo Xuanyu didn’t look convinced at all, but he gave a hesitant nod. Then, he dug into his sleeve and pulled out a handkerchief, offering it to her with sad, sombre eyes. Despite herself, Wen Qing smiled slightly.

“Thank you, Xuanyu, but...” she said softly, raising her shoulders gently, so the chains dangled behind her.

Mo Xuanyu nodded, hesitating for a moment. Then, he stepped forward, gingerly dabbing the handkerchief over Wen Qing’s cheeks to wipe her tears away himself. Then he stepped back, looking a little uncertain, and Wen Qing smiled.

“Thank you, Xuanyu, you’re –” she froze, her eyes fixed on his sleeve. Something else was sticking out of it, obviously having been dislodged by his pulling out the handkerchief, and her heart immediately began to race. “Xuanyu, is that...”

He followed her gaze and stiffened, his cheeks going red. “I didn’t steal it!”

“I didn’t think you had,” Wen Qing breathed, “Xuanyu, is that a talisman?”

“Not a real one. It’s empty,” he said, warily pulling it out of his sleeve and showing her. It was a little crumpled, and utterly blank, but it was a talisman, and Wen Qing’s mind raced.

“Xuanyu,” she said, meeting the boy’s eyes, “you might have just saved us.”

His eyes widened comically. “What?”

“I’m going to need you to help me,” Wen Qing said seriously. “We’re going to send a message to Wei Wuxian and tell him where we are, okay? But I can’t use my hands, so I’m going to need you to do *exactly* as I say, do you understand?”

“I understand, Qing-jie,” said Xuanyu, nodding quickly, and she smiled at him.

“Okay – in my sleeve, a little way up, there’s a needle – I need you to reach in *very* carefully, and pull it out.”

“It’s in your arm?” Xuanyu asked, horrified, and Wen Qing shook her head.

“No, in my sleeve. Be very careful, it’s sharp.”

“Okay,” Xuanyu said, moving behind her and taking her arm. It took him a minute to find the needle, and then he pulled it out carefully. “Okay, I got it!”

“Well done,” said Wen Qing. “Now, I need you to prick my thumb with it, and then wiggle it around a bit until its bleeding.”

“What?” he squeaked, tumbling backwards. “I can’t do that!”

“Yes, you can,” she said calmly. “It will only hurt me a little, and we need to. I don’t have any ink, do you?” When he shook his head, she shrugged. “Then what else can we do?”

Mo Xuanyu thought intently for a moment, his brow furrowing and his lower lip sticking out just a little. Then, he turned dark eyes on Meng Yao. “We could use *his* blood.”

Wen Qing almost laughed. “Well, we could, but I would truly rather get pricked with a needle than go anywhere near him, wouldn’t you?” Reluctantly, Mo Xuanyu nodded, and Wen Qing sat up straighter. “So, if you – actually it would be best if you roll my sleeve up a little, and instead of my thumb we’ll use the top of my wrist, just in case they see it.”

Mo Xuanyu winced, but did as he was told. She could feel the needle hovering a hair’s breadth above her skin, and she heard his breath catch.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” he worried, and she smiled.

“It’s alright. I’m a cultivator – this is nothing. I promise.”

Mo Xuanyu hesitated, and then slowly pushed the needle into Wen Qing’s skin. Truly, an acupuncture needle wasn’t the right tool for the job, but they had nothing else, and Wen Qing schooled her face into stillness as Mo Xuanyu dug and scratched at her skin until it began to bleed. She knew he was trying to be gentle, that he wouldn’t know that his going slow hurt more, but it didn’t matter. The pain was nothing. When she felt the blood begin to seep down her wrist, she nodded.

“Okay, so this is going to be very unhygienic and a little gross, but we don’t have time for anything else, so I’m going to need you to use your finger to draw, okay? With the blood.”

Mo Xuanyu’s nose wrinkled up, but he nodded valiantly, and Wen Qing talked him through drawing the talisman. For all his youth and fear, Xuanyu had a steady hand, and Wen Qing felt hope beat in her heart as the talisman took form. There were few communication spells that could pass through wards such as those on the door, and fewer still as powerful as the communication talismans she had used when she served Wen Ruohan. They had been designed to span great distances, to pass unnoticed through any ward, but their limitation was in their design – unlike many talisman spells that could be transferred onto other mediums, they needed talisman paper to work.

And then, finally, it was done.

“Well done, Xuanyu,” she breathed. “Now, put it in my hands, quickly now.”

He obeyed, and Wen Qing took a deep breath, pouring as much spiritual energy as she could into the talisman, and then she felt a familiar buzz of power on her fingertips. Mo Xuanyu gasped, flinching back.

“Qing-jie, it – it caught fire!”

“I know,” she said breathlessly, looking at Xuanyu. “It worked.”

## Chapter End Notes

Mo Xuanyu to the rescue! I hope you enjoyed that chapter, please do let me know what you thought of it if you'd like to, I adore reading your comments. And we really do have a happy ending coming, I promise. Until next time, take care!



# Chapter 31

## Chapter Notes

Thank you all so much for the wonderful response to the last chapter! I'm glad you're all enjoying it, and I hope you enjoy this one!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Zizhen woke to the sound of arguing. Normally, this would not be notable – he had three sisters and a brother, and his house was rarely quiet – but that normal was gone forever, now, and while the voices were familiar, they certainly did not belong to his siblings.

“-going, not after yesterday!” That was Jiang Wanyin, his voice much harsher than it had been the night before.

“We have to go!” protested Jinling, sounding equally fierce. “Sizhui’s our friend, you can’t just run off without us, while we’re asleep – Zizhen! Zizhen, get out here!”

His heart sinking, Zizhen fumbled his way out of bed, rubbing the sleep from eyes as he left Jinling’s room and stepped outside into morning. He blinked. Jinling was stalking after Jiang Wanyin, who seemed to have given up on the argument – he had turned his back on Jinling, and was striding towards Wei Wuxian, Jin Zixuan, Lan Qiren, and Nie Mingjue. With the exception of Wei Wuxian, each of the men were holding their swords, and they all looked ready to depart, and Zizhen’s heart leapt.

“Is there news?” he cried, hurrying to Jinling’s side. “Do we know where they are? What’s going on?”

Jinling looked at him, his face twisted with fury. “Wei Wuxian got a message from Wen Qing and we know where they are but Jiujiu says we can’t come! They tried to leave before we woke up!”

“Jiang Cheng, we don’t have time for this,” said Wei Wuxian, his voice strained, and Jiang Wanyin nodded, mounting his sword.

“Hey!” Jinling yelled, but Zizhen put a hand on his arm. To be honest, he had been expecting that they wouldn’t be allowed to join the next rescue attempt, though he hadn’t dreamed it would be so soon.

“I understand you’re upset, A-Ling,” said Jin Zixuan, already aloft on his sword. “But it’s too dangerous.”

“I’m not a child!” Jinling protested, and Zizhen flinched.

“Yes, you are,” said Wei Wuxian darkly. “Stay here. Jiang Cheng.”

“Stay!” Jiang Wanyin said firmly, pointing at Jinling as if he was a dog. “I mean it!”

And then, without another word, the men took off.

“Wait!” Jinling cried, but the anger was fading from his voice, panic taking his place, and Zizhen sighed, squeezing his arm.

“I didn’t think they’d let us go,” he said dully. “We should go see Jingyi. The doctor said he’d wake up in the morning.”

“And what if this is a trap, too, huh?” demanded Jinling, rounding on Zizhen. His face was red, and his hair tousled and tangled, and Zizhen had never seen him look younger. “What if they all go, and they don’t come back?!”

Zizhen winced. “If that happened, I don’t think our being there would change anything. What could we do that they can’t? We’d just die, too.”

“So?” Jinling’s fists were clenched and trembling. “Do you think I care about that? Do you think I’d rather sit here, knowing that Jiujiu and A-Die and Wei Wuxian are gone, and it’s all my fault?”

Genuinely confused, Zizhen frowned. “What are you talking about? How is any of this your fault?”

“*I’m* the one that snuck out to the temple, *I’m* the one that got us caught! If I hadn’t, do you think we’d be here now? We’re not supposed to *be* here, Zizhen, and I thought – I thought we could make things better, that A-Die and A-Niang – but this, this – if Zewu Jun and Hanguang Jun and Sizhui are gone and, and if A-Die and Jiujiu and Wei Wuxian don’t come back, that isn’t *better*, that’s worse, that’s so much worse!” There were tears glistening on Jinling’s cheeks, but his voice didn’t tremble.

“Jinling, it’s not your –”

“And even if it *wasn’t* my fault, I still couldn’t stay!” said Jinling furiously. “You don’t understand! I don’t – I don’t have *friends*, I never – I had Jiujiu and Xiao-shushu and Fairy and now – now if Jiujiu and A-Die and Wei Wuxian fly into a trap and die I – I’d rather die with them than be left behind!”

“Do you not think Jingyi and Sizhui and I are your friends?” Zizhen asked, too tired to keep the edge of hurt from his voice. Jinling flinched, looking uncertainly at him, and Zizhen pressed on. “Why on earth would we have followed you to the temple if we weren’t your friends? Of course we’re your friends.” Jinling’s lip quivered, and he looked away. “And what about your mother?”

“What about Sizhui?” Jinling replied sharply, looking back up at Zizhen. “How can you not want to help him?”

Zizhen recoiled, the words hitting like a whip across his chest. “What – of course I want to help him, how could you *say* that?”

“You’re not acting like it! You’re just standing there fighting with me-”

Zizhen let out a wild, somewhat strangled laugh. “I’m not fighting with you – you’re fighting with me! I don’t even know *why* we’re fighting!”

Jinling’s eyes narrowed. “Well, are you coming with me or not?”

“With you?”

“To follow A-Die and Jiujiu. To go and find Sizhui.”

Zizhen hesitated. “Following people blindly into trouble is how we got into this mess... Not that I’m agreeing it’s your fault, because it’s not!” he added hastily, before Jinling could misinterpret him.

“Well, I suppose all I can ask is that you don’t stop me,” Jinling said stubbornly, stalking past Zizhen and back into the room, returning a moment later with his borrowed sword.

“Wait!” Zizhen raced back inside, snatching up his outer robes and Suibian, before scrambling back out to where Jinling was – mercifully – waiting. “I can’t fly on my own, though.”

“Why –” Jinling began, but then he looked at Suibian. “Oh. Well, come on, then!”

“For the record, I think this is a terrible idea,” said Zizhen, fumbling to tie his robes. “Do you know where we’re going?”

“South-west Qishan, east of Xidi,” recited Jinling. “Wei Wuxian was telling A-Niang – she’s gone to sit with Jingyi, so when he wakes up...” Jinling’s voice trailed off a little guiltily, and a pang of guilt struck Zizhen too.

“Hang on, just a second!” he said, ducking back into the room once again to borrow a pen. He scribbled a note on some talisman paper, and then added a simple spell on the back, watching it flutter off towards Wei Wuxian’s rooms. When Jingyi woke, he would know where they were gone, and why. Still feeling very much like this was a bad idea, Zizhen jumped onto the back of Jinling’s sword. “Okay. let’s go.”

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They had given him osmanthus cake with breakfast. Wangji hadn’t touched it. He hadn’t touched any of the food they had delivered this morning – his stomach was curled and knotted so severely he doubted eating would do him any good. He had taken several sips of the tea, but that too was familiar – it was a blend popular in Cloud Recesses, one of Xichen’s favourites, and it had made his stomach clench all the tighter. It was almost as though his body was trying to tighten around his golden core, to keep it where it belonged.

The food he left on the tray, but Wangji poured the tea down the small drain that passed for a toilet in the back of the cell. He couldn’t bear the scent of it, so tantalisingly close to the

smell of home.

He hated that Jin Guangyao knew enough to choose foods that Wangji liked, tea that he enjoyed, for what would likely be his last meal. It was likely through Xichen he knew what Wangji liked and disliked, since no one else ever really seemed to know, and that made it all the worse.

There were robes left for him too, clean and white, though in the style of Moling Su, rather than Gusu Lan. He wanted to ignore those, too, but his own robes were soaked in Sizhui's blood. Most of it had dried, now, but his sleeves were still heavy and sticky, and just looking at it made him feel sick with guilt and grief. So, reluctantly, he had allowed the guard to remove his shackles for a moment to let him remove his own outer robes and replace them with the clean ones. Though they were bloodstained in places, too, he kept his own inner robes on. He would not die dressed solely in the garb of Moling Su.

Now, of course, his hands were chained to the wall again, and the guard had long since disappeared, leaving Wangji alone with the food he would not eat, and the tea he would not drink, and the thoughts that would not leave him alone.

Wangji took a deep breath, focusing on the stench of the rot and filth in the dungeon, and not the faint echo of the scent of the tea. It was less painful that way.

He heard the scrape of the key sliding into the lock of the wooden door, and Wangji remained still, keeping his eyes closed, his posture perfect. He knew that his forehead ribbon was straight, that his hands had combed his hair through to the best approximation of elegance he could manage. He was a Jade of Lan, and he would die like one.

The door opened, and someone stepped inside. Wangji kept his eyes closed.

“Good morning, Hanguang Jun,” said Jin Guangyao. “Do you still wish to see your son?”

Wangji's eyes snapped open, his head turning despite himself, and Jin Guangyao smiled. A guard walked past him, opening the door to Wangji's cell and unchaining him from the wall. Then, he revealed a pair of shackles, and Lan Wangji looked at Jin Guangyao.

“That will not be necessary,” he said coldly, and Jin Guangyao smiled.

“Very well. You are, of course, aware of the consequences should you try to escape, or to make a nuisance of yourself?”

“I am.” Wangji prayed that would be enough – he would rather bear the shackles than listen to Jin Guangyao threaten Sizhui again.

Jin Guangyao considered him for a moment, and then nodded. “Very well. Follow me, then, please, Lan Wangji.”

Wangji rose, following Jin Guangyao out of the cell, and into the dark corridor beyond it. His heart was so heavy that it made his chest feel tight as their path climbed upwards, and then they came out into daylight. The sky was clouded and grey, which seemed fitting to Wangji

as he was led through a grim, overgrown garden, where even the weeds seemed to be shrivelled and dead, and into what had clearly once been a gentry house. They came to a room with two armed guards on the door, and Jin Guangyao held out his hand.

“I will give you some privacy,” he said, in a kind tone that set Wangji’s teeth on edge. “Of course, Zhang Wei will be in the room with you, to ensure you do not try anything. We are still preparing the operating room – you may take your time.”

One of the guards stepped into the room – presumably Zhang Wei, though Lan Wangji could not care less – and Wangji followed. The room was mostly empty, but there was a single raised bed against the far wall, and on the bed was Sizhui, lying so still that Wangji’s heart stopped in his chest.

*No – no, no, no –*

Sizhui sighed softly in his sleep, and Lan Wangji almost sobbed with relief. Instead, he walked swiftly to the side of the bed, reaching down to take Sizhui’s hand, but he froze before he could touch it. There was a tight, metal cuff around Sizhui’s wrist, chaining him to the bed. Fury trembled through him, but then Sizhui’s face shifted slightly into a light frown, and sorrow beat back Wangji’s anger.

If this was the last time his son would see him, he did not want to be angry. Ignoring the chains as best he could, he took Sizhui’s hand and squeezed it gently, though he had to swallow the lump in his throat before he could murmur, “Sizhui?”

Sizhui’s frown deepened, and he took a sharper breath, his slowly easing open his eyes. They were a little hazy, and he blinked several times, but then he looked up at Wangji and his eyes widened and focused, and he gasped.

“Baba!” There was a clank of chains as Sizhui reached for Wangji with his other hand, too, though the chains stopped him short and Sizhui blinked. “I mean, Hang-”

“I’m here,” Wangji promised, cutting Sizhui off. “Baba is here.”

Sizhui’s eyes filled with tears, but he gave a brave smile all the same. “Did – did they hurt you?”

“No.” There was a lump in Wangji’s throat again, but he ignored it, as well as the more accurate truth of ‘not yet.’ “I am unharmed.”

Sizhui’s lip trembled, grasping Wangji’s hand tightly. “Baba, he – he wants to take your golden core!”

Lan Wangji nodded, and the tears broke from Sizhui’s eyes, spilling down his cheeks.

“You can’t let them,” he whispered, and Wangji wiped the tears from his son’s face.

“It’s alright,” he said, and Sizhui let out a ragged sob, shaking his head.

“No – no, it’s not, it’s – no... Baba, please...”

“It *will* be alright,” Wangji amended, rubbing circles into the back of Sizhui’s hand. “You will be alright. There is a deal. You will not be harmed again. You will be safe.”

“I won’t be,” Sizhui begged. “I won’t, not, not if you’re gone! And, and he’ll just break the deal, you know he will! You have to fight it! Baba, *please!*”

“Sizhui...” Wangji’s voice broke from him as a whisper, and he swallowed. He stroked Sizhui’s hair back from his forehead, running his thumb over the place where his son’s headband should be. It took him a moment to put his thoughts into words. “I cannot let them hurt you. I hope you can forgive me.”

Tears streaming down his cheeks, Sizhui closed his eyes, shaking his head slightly. “I’m sorry,” he choked. “Baba, I’m so sorry, I’m so sorry!”

“Do not be,” said Wangji firmly, putting his hand on Sizhui’s cheek. “Look at me.” Sizhui opened his eyes, the fear and guilt and grief within them striking Wangji in the heart. “You do not need to be sorry. I am – I am so glad to have known you, Sizhui. I am proud of you. If this is all the time we may have, it is worth it. I love you.”

“Baba,” Sizhui whispered, shaking his head. “Baba...”

“I love you,” Wangji repeated, wiping Sizhui’s tears away. “I will always believe this is worth it. To keep you safe. Always. You are my son.”

“I love you too, Baba,” Sizhui said desperately. “I love you, too.”

Wangji felt the heat of tears in his eyes, but he blinked them back, stroking Sizhui’s hair gently. He wasn’t sure what else to say, and he had never been any good at small talk, but he couldn’t help but fear as soon as the conversation stopped he would be removed from the room, pulled away forever, and he couldn’t stand it.

After a moment, however, Sizhui broke the silence. “Baba? Do – do you think Jingyi’s okay?”

“I hope so. Wei Ying will have found him. Wei Ying will look after him.” He closed his eyes, the pieces of his heart aching more than ever. “Sizhui,” he murmured, unable to open his eyes. “When you return to Lotus Pier, will – will you tell Wei Ying that I love him?”

Sizhui sobbed, but Wangji could feel him nod. “I will, I promise.”

Somehow, it simultaneously felt like a weight had been lifted from Wangji’s shoulders, and a boulder had crushed his chest. He forced his eyes to open. “Thank you,” he said softly. The terror and anguish on Sizhui’s face was almost too much to take, and Wangji started stroking Sizhui’s hair again. “You will be okay. And Jingyi. You will go home. See to the rabbits. You will be safe, and warm, and loved. You will never be alone. Wei Ying will take care of you. You will be okay, Sizhui.”

Sizhui nodded, but he didn’t say anything, instead just clinging to Wangji’s hand.

“Are you done?” asked the guard in the corner, and Sizhui flinched.

Wangji glared over his shoulder, making his voice as cold as possible. “No.” Then he looked straight back at Sizhui. “I will be here as long as I can. I promise.”

A small, broken smile tugged at Sizhui’s lips, and he whispered, “I told you.”

Wangji frowned slightly. “Told me what?”

“You’ve always been the best father,” Sizhui said, his smile growing just slightly stronger. “Always. You... you’ve always been there.” Sizhui’s lips trembled again, but he took a deep breath, and kept talking. “When I was little, you used to bury me in rabbits. Especially if I was upset, or afraid. You never pushed, you just put bunny after bunny into my lap until I couldn’t breathe for laughing...”

His heart ached as he pictured it, but he did his best to smile down at his son. “Perhaps you can do the same for A-Yuan,” he murmured, but it was the wrong thing to say – the grief in Sizhui’s eyes grew deeper.

“Perhaps,” he murmured back, his eyes very far away.

Wangji did not know why he did it, but without thinking, he began to hum quietly, and as he did Sizhui looked at him, and among the turmoil in his eyes there was also wonder, and so Wangji kept humming. He sang melodies from Gusu, and snatches of songs he’d composed himself. Though he wanted to, he never quite hummed Wangxian – the guard was still in the room, and he was not worthy of hearing it. But Sizhui was, and Wangji could see his smile grow a little softer when he risked a few notes of the chorus.

Eventually, far too soon, Jin Guangyao stepped inside the room. Even with his back to the door, Lan Wangji knew the moment he appeared, because Sizhui cringed, his grip on Wangji’s hand tightening. Lan Wangji didn’t turn around. He continued to hum and to stroke Sizhui’s hair, only pausing to run his thumb over his son’s furrowing brow.

“Hanguang Jun,” said Jin Guangyao. “It’s time to go.”

Sizhui’s breath hitched in his throat, and Lan Wangji stiffened, falling silent. Sizhui tugged his hand free from Wangji’s to grab his wrist instead, pushing his trembling fingers into Wangji’s pulse point. The idea of pulling away and breaking that grip went against every instinct and Wangji’s body, and he found himself frozen.

“I would rather not have to convince you,” Jin Guangyao said, and Wangji flinched.

Time was up, and it wasn’t enough. It wasn’t nearly enough. Wangji leant down and wrapped his arms around Sizhui, hugging him as close as he dared, achingly mindful of his wounds. With a sob, Sizhui clung to him, his fists clenching in Wangji’s robes. He was shivering, his breath short, and panicked, and Lan Wangji wanted to hold him forever.

“I love you, A-Yuan,” he whispered, and Sizhui sobbed again, clinging to him.

“I love you too, Baba. I love you.”

Wangji forced himself to rise, allowing only a brief pause to kiss Sizhui's forehead, and then he stepped back. Sizhui swallowed, his hands twisting in the bedsheets, tears on his cheeks, but he was quiet as Lan Wangji forced himself to follow Jin Guangyao out of the room. It was only when they were in the hall, and the door was closing behind him, that he heard Sizhui start to cry.

"He always was a strong one," Jin Guangyao said. "Er-ge was very fond of him."

"Do not talk of him," Wangji bit out, and Jin Guangyao glanced at him, looking amused.

"Very well."

They walked in silence until they reached another door bearing two guards, and Wangji's aching heart stumbled faster.

"Remember," said Jin Guangyao sharply, "he is not conscious. If you make too much noise, or try to move him, I will remove you. But I will allow you to say your goodbyes." With that, Jin Guangyao stepped into the room, and Wangji's blood boiled.

Xiongzhong was *his* brother. Jin Guangyao had no right to be there, he had no right to –

Wangji's thoughts stopped the moment he walked through the door.

Xichen was lying on a bed at the back of the room, his skin ashen white, and there were dark, bruise-like circles under his eyes. He looked ill, very ill, and Wangji rushed to the bed, falling to his knees beside it. Xiongzhong's forehead ribbon was still missing.

"What have you done to him?" he demanded, his voice low and trembling.

"Nothing he won't recover fully from," said Jin Guangyao softly. "Don't worry, Hanguang Jun. I will take good care of him."

Lan Wangji couldn't move. A small, childish part of him almost expected Xichen to open his eyes, to reach for Shuoyue and Liebing and make the danger go away, but he knew he wouldn't. He couldn't. And there was nothing Wangji could do, either, nothing that could stop Jin Guangyao from spiriting Xichen away forever. Jin Guangyao would take Wangji's golden core and his life and his brother, and Xiongzhong would spend the rest of his life unaware of it, mourning Wangji without knowing that his murderer walked beside him.

He didn't notice the tears leaving his eyes until one fell from his chin onto his arm. He didn't notice he was trembling until he glanced down and saw his shaking hands.

"Come," said Jin Guangyao, and no – it wasn't enough, it wasn't enough time, Wangji wasn't *ready*. "You will just upset yourself, the longer you sit here. Come."

Wangji wanted to scream, and he grabbed his brother's hand, squeezing it tightly for a moment. There were a thousand things to say, a million things Xichen needed to know, and Wangji had the words for none of them. All he could do was choke back a sob and close his eyes.



“Goodbye, Xiongzhong.”

And then he let go, and allowed Jin Guangyao to lead him away. Vaguely, he noticed that the room the operation was in was closer to Sizhui’s than Xichen’s, and that Wen Qing was already inside it.

To Wangji’s utter horror, so was Sizhui. He was still on a raised bed, still chained to it, but now Su She was standing at the head of that bed, a knife in his hand.

“What is this?” Wangji demanded, rounding on Jin Guangyao. “Sizhui is to be safe. That was the deal.”

“He will be. But there is no way I will allow Wen-guniang free-reign over my body wife a knife without a more immediate insurance. What if she decides to slit my throat? Of course, Minshan and the guards would kill Lan Sizhui all the same, and indeed they have orders to, but I prefer being alive. I intend to stay that way. So as long as I stay breathing, so does Lan Sizhui.”

Fury surged through Wangji so strongly he trembled, and he gritted his teeth. Sizhui should not have to see this. He should not have to see any of it.

Jin Guangyao smiled. “Well, Wen-guniang. Shall we begin?”

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Somewhere close by, someone was talking. He couldn’t make out the words, or even the exact voice, but it sounded familiar, and Xichen wondered if he should try to listen. His aching body felt heavy, and his throat was raw, and really, he just wanted to sleep. Surely, whoever it was would wake him if it was important.

A hand squeezed his, painfully tight.

“Goodbye, Xiongzhong.”

Wangji. That – that was Wangji’s voice, but Xichen had never heard him sound like that, never – that goodbye was *final*, so final, and alarm shot through Xichen’s heart. Something was wrong. Something was very wrong. He tried to open his eyes, to reach for Wangji’s hand, but he couldn’t move. Frustration roared through him, though it was quickly swallowed by panic as Wangji’s hand let go of his.

His hearing sharpened as his desperation rose, and he heard soft footsteps walking away, heard a door close and the footsteps disappear, and even without seeing he knew that Wangji had left the room.

*Goodbye, Xiongzhong.*

Wherever Wangji was going, he did not expect to return, and a fear Xichen had not felt since the height of battle filled him. He reached for his golden core, not entirely knowing what he hoped to do. Whatever illness this was seemed to consume every part of him, and surely if there was anything his core could do it would have already done it, but he reached –

And he felt spiritual energy surge through him, felt the stabbing pain of pins and needles shoot over every inch of his skin, and he gasped, his eyes flickering open. For a moment, the world was hazy, and there was a pounding pain in the back of his skull, but it didn't matter – his eyes were open, he could move –

His limbs still felt heavy, cumbersome and uncooperative, and he pushed himself upright, looking around the room. He was in the same place he had been the last time he woke, but now he was alone, and the door was closed.

The door was closed, and Wangji was on the other side.

*Goodbye, Xiongzhang.*

Xichen dragged himself from the bed, staggered a few steps to the door, but it was almost too much. Stars danced before his eyes, and his stomach lurched, and he grasped the doorframe, breathing heavily.

On the other side of the door, people were talking. Murmuring. Xichen held his breath – he would not have been able to hear them from the bed, he was barely able to hear them now, but their words caught his attention.

“...much longer are we going to have to be here?”

“Ah, not long now. Lianfang Zun said as soon as his experiment is complete and Hanguang Jun is dead, we'll move out.”

The world spun, and Xichen doubled over, his grip on the doorframe the only thing that stopped him hitting the floor. It didn't – didn't make sense – the man must be lying, A-Yao – A-Yao would never hurt Wangji, he wouldn't, and what experiment? What was going *on*?

“How long do you think that will take?” asked the first man.

The second man snorted. “You're so impatient.”

“I just think it's safer to move on sooner rather than later.”

“I suppose... I don't know how long it will take, but I doubt it'll be too long. For Zewu Jun's sake, Lianfang Zun will want to make it look like it was over quickly. I doubt he'll just slit his throat and be done with it, but –”

Xichen threw up. It – Lianfang Zun had to be someone else, it was a trap, or a set-up, but it didn't matter – it didn't matter because whoever it was had Wangji, and they were going to kill Wangji, and Xichen needed to *move* –

Shuddering, he staggered backwards, looking around the room for some sort of weapon. His hand ached for Shuoyue – and at once his sword shot out from under the bed, landing in his open palm. He was trembling violently, but he didn't have time to stop or to breathe or to do anything more than step around the filth on the floor and pull open the door.

By instinct, he moved to disarm the first man as he turned to the door in surprise, but Xichen's limbs were three beats behind his already struggling mind, and Shuoyue sunk deep into the man's chest. The other man, a guard in Jin clothing, was stepping back, opening his mouth as if to shout, and Xichen lurched forward, seizing the man's collar with his fist and pushing him against the wall. Clumsily, he pulled Shuoyue free of the first corpse, and pushed it to the second man's neck.

"Where is my brother?" he demanded, his voice hoarse and rasping and almost a growl.

"Zewu Jun," the man gasped, and Xichen pushed his sword closer to the man's neck, his trembling hand bringing beads of blood to his blade. "Please!"

"Where is Wangji?"

The guard raised a trembling hand, pointing down the hall.

Xichen pushed away from the man, who immediately gave a strangled cry and fell to the ground, and distantly Xichen realised that in pushing away he had also slit the guard's throat. He might have felt guilty, if the man hadn't just been discussing the death of his little brother.

*Goodbye, Xiongzhang.*

The smell of blood was dizzying, nauseating, but Xichen couldn't stop. He had to move, had to find Wangji. He stumbled down the corridor, moving quickly but clumsily. It was almost like the time he and Nie Mingjue had got intoxicated in Qinghe as teens – there was a similar lack of control over his limbs, but it was also a lot less pleasant and a lot more painful.

A lot more terrifying.

The corridor seemed to go on forever, but at last he rounded the corner and saw another door with another two guards outside it, and he gritted his teeth. They both looked bored, but then one saw him, and opened his mouth, and Xichen swung his sword, sending a blast of spiritual energy towards them. Once again, his golden core seemed to act as though there was nothing wrong, and the men crumpled, but Xichen crumpled, too, the force of the blast throwing him back onto the ground.

He gasped, but the breath caught in his throat and then he was coughing up blood, and –

There was a scream.

It was short, cutting off abruptly after little more than a second, but it stopped Xichen's heart.

It was Wangji. He *knew* it was Wangji, but it was a sound he would have never imagined his little brother capable of making – it was piercing and loud and so agonised that Xichen threw himself forward, crawling until he could stagger to his feet, stumbling until he could run.

*Goodbye, Xiongzhang.*

*No – no, no, no –*

In the endless seconds before he reached the door, Xichen heard the sound of someone sobbing quietly, and a long, muffled keening noise, as though someone was trying to trap a scream behind their teeth, and Xichen threw himself through the door.

And he saw Wangji, strapped down to a bed, and Wen Qing was there, and there was a scalpel in her hand, in Wangji's *gut*, and her hands were *inside* his brother and Wangji's eyes were squeezed shut and his jaw was clenched and his head tilted back and he was still screaming through his teeth and –

“Er-ge!” said A-Yao, sounding surprised and a little out of breath, and he was on a bed too, and there was an incision in his gut too, but he wasn't tied down and his eyes were hardening, and Wangji gasped –

“Xiongzhang!” Wangji cried, his voice raw and desperate. “Run! *Run!*”

Wen Qing had stepped away, her hands raised in surrender before her, but she was still holding the scalpel and Wangji was still bleeding, and Xichen levelled his sword towards her.

“No,” croaked Wangji, “it's Jin Guangyao – Xiongzhang, *run!*”

“Er-ge,” said A-Yao again, and this time his voice was calm, soothing, and he was sitting up and wincing. “I don't know what you think you're seeing, but you are sick-”

“Xiongzhang, don't listen to him, run!” choked Wangji, and A-Yao's eyes narrowed.

“Minshan –”

“*No!*” The cry that ripped from his brother's throat was beyond desperate as he craned his neck to look at the back of the room. Xichen followed his gaze, for the first time noticing Su She against the back wall, standing beside the bed of a boy Xichen didn't know – a boy that looked utterly terrified. “No – leave him alone! *Sizhui!*”

And then Lan Xichen heard the piercing sound of a flute, and the rest was chaos.

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! I hope you enjoyed that chapter, please do let me know what you thought if you have the time and inclination - I love hearing from you! Until next time, please take care!

# Chapter 32

## Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for the amazing response to the last chapter! Getting 50 reviews for one chapter is just insane, thank you so much! I hope that you enjoy this one!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Wei Wuxian was in control until he heard Lan Zhan scream. He accepted that to use Chenqing was to announce his presence, that they had a greater chance of success without drawing attention to themselves. He accepted that it made sense for Jiang Cheng and Jin Zixuan to split off when they found out from a guard that Mo Xuanyu was being held as collateral in a dungeon while Jin Guangyao's 'experiment' took place. He accepted that the guards they faced were killed quickly, and quietly, and he accepted that it was largely Nie Mingjue and Lan Qiren who killed them.

The rage and grief and fear that burnt within him was stronger than anything he had ever felt before, and even before he made any effort to summon it resentful energy curled from Chenqing, and he wanted to release it all – to butcher ever last soul who stood between him and Lan Zhan and Sizhui – but he couldn't.

But then he heard Lan Zhan *scream*.

*"No! No, leave him alone – Sizhui!"*

And the terror in Lan Zhan's voice split Wei Wuxian's soul in two.

His own terror came out in a sharp shrill note from Chenqing, and the resentful energy that had coiled around his flute and his wrists and his heart as his anger grew gained purpose, shooting into the room faster than any man could hope to run – seeking Sizhui.

Wei Wuxian burst through the door a split second after it, his eyes scanning quickly over the room. Horror twisted through him at the sight of Lan Zhan strapped down to a bed, his gut already cut open – if his core was gone already, if Wei Wuxian was too late -

But there wasn't time to think about it, because Wen Qing was in the centre of the room with her hands in the hair, standing between Lan Zhan's bed and Jin Guangyao's, and Jin Guangyao was sitting up, one hand on his stomach and the other clutching a knife, and there was nowhere for her to run – in front of her was Lan Xichen, who looked like death, his sword trembling in his hand, and behind her was Su She –

And Su She was moving, lurching down towards the cloud of resentful energy already swirling around Sizhui, and there was a knife in his hand, and he was going to get through before the black smoke had a chance to form a shield and –

A sword whistled past Wei Wuxian's face, landing with a sickening thud in Su She's shoulder, pinning the man to the wall. Su She shrieked, grappling at the sword with his other hand, but then his lips sealed shut, and Wei Wuxian saw Lan Qiren out of the corner of his eye, now swordless as he grabbed Lan Xichen's arm. But then Wei Wuxian caught a glimpse of Sizhui's terrified face, and his anger rose, pouring into the music. The energy around Sizhui shivered, and then settled, a moving, roving shield, and Wei Wuxian turned his attention to Jin Guangyao.

Never, in all his life, had Wei Wuxian felt a fury like this.

He had come close with Wen Chao, with the man who had slaughtered his clan and burnt his home and almost killed his little brother, but this – this rage was even sharper, even colder.

This man had hurt everyone Wei Wuxian loved.

This man had taken Wen Qing, and his son, and his Lan Zhan.

It was impossible to tell where Wei Wuxian's resentment ended and the resentful energy began, and even as Jin Guangyao reached for Wen Qing a thick tendril of black smoke tightened around his wrist, tugging it away.

Without missing a beat, Wen Qing ducked around the end of Lan Zhan's bed, and as soon as it stood between her and Jin Guangyao she took her scalpel to the straps tying Lan Zhan down.

Outside, there was the clatter of footsteps, and yells of "Lianfang Zun!" but Nie Mingjue snarled, "I'm on it," and ducked out of the room, and so Wei Wuxian ignored them.

And he kept his eyes on Jin Guangyao.

When he had killed Wen Chao, Wei Wuxian had summoned ghosts to enact the torment. This was different. Though it took less power, it took more control, and Wei Wuxian's focus was razor sharp as he played, guiding the black smoke to Jin Guangyao. He watched with a bitter satisfaction as it poured into his mouth and up his nose, as Jin Guangyao choked and gagged and fell back against the bed.

"What's going on?" choked Lan Xichen, and his voice sounded raw and painful. Out of the corner of his eye, Wei Wuxian saw him leaning on Lan Qiren, and it looked like he was struggling to keep upright. "What are you – stop, stop! He can't breathe, please, Wei-gongzi –"

"That Jin Guangyao comes from the future," Lan Zhan said tightly, painedly, and Wei Wuxian poured more strength into his playing, watching the energy Jin Guangyao choked on grow thicker and stronger. "He has no golden core. He wanted Wen-guniang to give him mine."

Lan Xichen gave a hollow cry.

“You interrupted in time, Zewu Jun,” said Wen Qing. Her voice was trembling. “Hanguang Jun still has his core. There’s an incision there, but I imagine its already healing.”

Relief thudded in Wei Wuxian’s heart, strong enough to feel even among his rage and hate. But then, Lan Zhan added,

“He wanted to use my death to convince you to leave the cultivation world with him.”

A blood red haze fell before Wei Wuxian’s eyes, and his playing grew sharper, quicker. Jin Guangyao spasmed on the bed, the wound in his stomach bleeding afresh as he did, and his eyes were rolling up into his skull.

“No,” Lan Xichen whispered, his voice breaking. “No, no, he – he wouldn’t, he – A-Yao wouldn’t – wouldn’t – he’d *never*, he –”

“Xiongzhang,” Lan Zhan said, his voice aching, and Wei Wuxian could see him struggling to sit up, could see him wincing. Lan Xichen choked, his gaze moving frantically between Lan Zhan and Jin Guangyao, and then he staggered backwards, sinking deeper into Lan Qiren’s arms.

“Wangji...” he whispered, and the pure devastation on Lan Xichen’s was so raw and anguished that Wei Wuxian’s fury grew even stronger.

He forced himself to focus, to put his attention back on Jin Guangyao, and grim satisfaction curled in his gut at what he saw. Blood was pouring from Jin Guangyao’s eyes and ears and nose, and as Wei Wuxian watched, the last bits of resentful energy still swirling around him surged into Jin Guangyao’s mouth.

For Wen Chao, Wei Wuxian had summoned some of the darkest parts of the Burial Mounds, but for Jin Guangyao he would bring the Burial Mounds themselves. This was what they did – what they had tried to do to Lan Zhan, to Wei Wuxian, what they had done to every other soul trapped inside before him. Now inside him, consuming him, the resentful energy scoured through Jin Guangyao’s body, filling every muscle and vein and bone with the pain of a thousand violent deaths.

In some places, Wei Wuxian knew, the pain would be searing, stabbing – in others it would be burning, blistering, throbbing, aching, but everywhere it would be agony, and it was hardly a second before Jin Guangyao started shrieking. With careful, sharp notes from Chenqing, Wei Wuxian kept Jin Guangyao’s head free of the energy’s touch – he didn’t want his mind to be dulled by the fog of possession – he didn’t want Jin Guangyao to miss a moment. Remembering Lan Zhan’s scream, and the terror on Sizhui’s face, Wei Wuxian played harder, stirring the resent into a frenzy, devouring Jin Guangyao from the inside out.

“*Lianfang Zun!*” Su She cried, and out of the corner of his eye, Wei Wuxian saw Lan Zhan stiffen, his eyes narrowing.

This revenge was not Wei Wuxian’s alone. Deftly, he altered his tune, drawing a little resentful energy from Sizhui’s shield and using it to pull Bichen from his belt, extending it to

Lan Zhan with a ghostly hand of black smoke. Lan Zhan took it, meeting Wei Wuxian's eyes over Chenqing, and Wei Wuxian raised his eyebrows.

*It's up to you.*

Lan Zhan stood up. Wen Qing put a hand on his shoulder, but Lan Zhan shook his head, walking past her, to where Su She cowered against the wall. His strides were stiff, and pained, slightly less graceful than usual, but Wei Wuxian could barely notice that beside the fury burning in Lan Zhan's eyes.

Without a word, Lan Zhan drove Bichen into Su She's stomach. Su She's eyes bulged, and then he choked, blood spilling from his mouth. A pitiful, pained whine broke from his throat, and Lan Zhan's jaw tightened. He twisted the sword, and then wrenched it up through Su She's chest. With a final, gargling cry, Su She fell limp, held upright only by Lan Qiren's sword, still pinning his shoulder to the wall as the life left his body.

Carefully, Wei Wuxian drew away the shield from around Sizhui, guiding the smoke into the still-spasming Jin Guangyao instead, and Lan Zhan all but fell against Sizhui's bed, grasping his hand. Wei Wuxian heard the soft murmur of Sizhui's voice, but he couldn't make out the words over Jin Guangyao's weakening screams. A moment later, Lan Zhan returned to Su She's corpse, snatching a ring of keys from his pocket and taking them to the shackles around Sizhui's wrists.

The second they were removed, Sizhui reached up, and Lan Zhan swept down at once, holding him close. Wei Wuxian saw Sizhui's arms wrap desperately around Lan Zhan, saw his fists clutch at Lan Zhan's robes, and then he saw Sizhui's face turn – saw his eyes fix on Wei Wuxian.

He still looked terrified.

Wei Wuxian stared down at Jin Guangyao. He hated him with a loathing that consumed almost everything within him – but he loved Lan Zhan and Sizhui more. The longer the scum before him was alive, the longer it would be before he got to hold them, the longer they would have to see him like this.

So Wei Wuxian shifted his tune again, playing faster, sharper notes, and Jin Guangyao's screams became shorter, higher, more desperate, until he managed to shriek out, "Er-ge! Help me!"

Out of the corner of his eye, Wei Wuxian saw Lan Zhan's head snap up, and Lan Xichen flinch violently.

Face twisted in horror, Lan Xichen opened his mouth, reaching out with a trembling hand, but Lan Qiren held him back, and Xichen glanced at Lan Zhan, who shook his head slightly. Then, Lan Xichen closed his eyes, turning his face away from Jin Guangyao.

Jin Guangyao let out a choked, grief-stricken cry, and Wei Wuxian brought the song to a crescendo. Jin Guangyao, jerked, and then choked, his eyes bulging wide. Blood spilt from



every hole in his head, and his hand clutched at his chest, and he gave several horrible, wrenching gasps for breath.

Narrowing his eyes, Wei Wuxian stepped forward, removing one hand from Chenqing to draw a knife from his robes. Jin Guangyao met his eyes, glaring hatefully up at him, and Wei Wuxian smiled.

And then he stabbed the knife down into Jin Guangyao's chest, and twisted, and Jin Guangyao's eyes flared open wide, and then he fell still, and he did not breathe again.

Grim satisfaction swept through Wei Wuxian as he raised his hands back to Chenqing, calling back the resentful energy and dispelling it with a note of thanks. Together, they had started a demonic torture for Jin Guangyao – for the rest of eternity, that job would belong to hell.

Exhaustion swept through him as the last puff of black smoke faded away, and Chenqing slipped from his fingers as he ran forward, reaching for Lan Zhan and Sizhui. In the span of a heartbeat, Lan Zhan was in his arms, and Wei Wuxian couldn't help but sob, pulling him close.

"Lan Zhan, Lan Zhan," he whispered, even as his other hand reached desperately for Sizhui's. Sizhui caught his hand quickly, squeezing tight. "Thank god... Thank god, thank god, thank god..."

"Wei Ying," Lan Zhan whispered back, pressing his face into Wei Wuxian's shoulder, and a lump rose in his throat. "Wei Ying..."

"It's okay," he promised. "It's okay, you're okay now, you're both going to be okay."

Lan Zhan shuddered, but he also nodded into Wei Wuxian's shoulder, and Wei Wuxian squeezed his eyes shut.

"Wei Ying, I love you."

A sob broke from Wei Wuxian's throat before he could stop it, and Lan Zhan's arms tightened around him. They were pressed so close together that Wei Wuxian could feel the rise and fall of Lan Zhan's chest against his, an undeniable proof that Lan Zhan was here, and alive, and safe, that he wasn't – that he wasn't –

Wei Wuxian let go of Lan Zhan's robes to sink a hand into his hair instead. "I love you, too," he said, though it came out more like another sob. "God, Lan Zhan I love you so much. I love you so much." He swallowed, resting his cheek on Lan Zhan's bowed head so he could look at Sizhui, squeezing his hand gently. "And A-Yuan – A-Yuan, I love you so much. So much."

Sizhui's eyes filled with tears, and he gripped tighter to Wei Wuxian's hand, giving a watery smile. "I love you, too, Xian-gege," he whispered. "Thank you, thank you..."

"Don't thank me," Wei Wuxian said, trying not to wince. "I'm your father, I'm just doing my job."

Sizhui shook his head slightly, but before he could say anything, Lan Zhan spoke quietly.  
“Thank you, Wei Ying.”

Wei Wuxian closed his eyes, holding tighter to them both. He didn’t need to be thanked – he hadn’t been able to protect either of them. He’d taken too long to find them, they’d both been injured, and he had almost – he had thought – he’d been so afraid that –

He took a deep, ragged breath, trying to get a hold of himself, but he was trembling, and Lan Zhan pulled back slightly, his eyes full of concern.

“Wei Ying?”

“I’m fine,” Wei Wuxian promised, tugging gently on Lan Zhan’s hair and aiming for a teasing grin. Lan Zhan’s eyebrows furrowed, and the concern in his eyes grew deeper, and Wei Wuxian’s smile fell away. He swallowed. “Lan Zhan, I thought – I thought I’d –” The words caught in his throat and panic flared up within him, convinced that if he said his fears aloud they would happen, and Lan Zhan and Sizhui would disappear or drop dead and he squeezed his eyes shut, shaking his head and clinging tighter.

“Wei Ying,” Lan Zhan said softly, but this time it wasn’t a question. This time, he spoke Wei Wuxian’s name like a reassurance, like a promise, and he pressed his forehead to Wei Wuxian’s. The cool metal of the cloud emblem on Lan Zhan’s headband was strangely grounding, and Wei Wuxian took a deep breath.

Lan Zhan was here. Sizhui was here. They were alive.

“What – what’s happening?” Lan Xichen asked brokenly, and Lan Zhan stiffened in Wei Wuxian’s arms, looking worriedly at his brother. “Shufu, I – I don’t understand, I…”

“You have been drugged, Zewu Jun,” Wen Qing said gently. “For the last five days. It is why you feel unwell, and a lack of control…”

“Drugged?” Lan Xichen echoed hollowly, and Wei Wuxian felt Lan Zhan lean towards his brother. Wei Wuxian forced himself to let go, and Lan Zhan glanced at him, and then nodded, squeezing Sizhui’s shoulder quickly.

Then, he walked swiftly across the room, pulling Lan Xichen out of Lan Qiren’s arms and into his own, embracing him tightly. For a moment, shock overwhelmed the horror on Lan Xichen’s face, but he didn’t hesitate to hug Lan Zhan back, clinging to him desperately. Vaguely, Wei Wuxian wondered how long it had been since Lan Zhan hugged his brother.

After a moment, Lan Zhan raised his head, though it didn’t look like he loosened his hold.  
“Wen-guniang, the poison…?”

“Apparently, it was chosen with care,” Wen Qing said, and though her tone was gentle, Wei Wuxian could see the bitter anger in her eyes. “There are rarely long-term effects, and if you allow me, Zewu Jun, I can see if there is anything more I can do to alleviate the symptoms –”

But Lan Xichen flinched, his hands curling into fists at the back of Lan Zhan's robes, and Wei Wuxian could see anger in his eyes. "You – you –"

Wen Qing went very still, and suddenly Wei Wuxian was in the Yiling Supervisory Office, watching with tears in his eyes as Jiang Cheng looked at Wen Qing and saw horror.

"Xiongzhong," said Lan Zhan, pulling out of Lan Xichen's grip. Lan Xichen's eyes widened, even more so when Lan Zhan took his hand. "She is of no fault. She acted because if she did not, Jin Guangyao would have—" Lan Zhan stopped abruptly, and the hair on the back of Wei Wuxian's neck stood up. His hand tightened around Sizhui's, and his heart began to pick up speed in his chest. He didn't know exactly what Jin Guangyao had threatened, but he could imagine it, and it made him feel sick, and – "Please, Xiongzhong. Let her help you."

Lan Xichen nodded reluctantly, and Wei Wuxian swallowed, looking back down at Sizhui. He was watching Lan Xichen and Lan Zhan with tears in his eyes and a trembling lip, and to Wei Wuxian's horror there was still fear on his face.

"A-Yuan," Wei Wuxian murmured, and Sizhui jumped. For a second, Wei Wuxian was afraid that Sizhui was scared of *him*, that seeing him murder Jin Guangyao with demonic cultivation had frightened his little Lan of a son away. But when Sizhui looked up at him, it was with a fearful hope that Wei Wuxian knew so well – it was the look on little A-Yuan's face when he woke from a nightmare, and looked up at Wei Wuxian as if he could solve every problem in the world. Wei Wuxian's heart ached.

"I didn't, I didn't know he'd been poisoned," Sizhui said in a small voice, one that grew even more afraid when his eyes widened, and he begged, "Xian-gege, is Jingyi okay?"

"He is," Wei Wuxian promised, squeezing Sizhui's hand. "The doctors say he's going to be absolutely fine."

Sizhui closed his eyes, letting out a sigh of relief, and Wei Wuxian took a deep breath. Fear was starting to speed up his heart again – Sizhui was still lying down, and he hadn't even tried to sit up, and Wei Wuxian needed to ask, he knew he needed to, but he didn't want to know the answer.

He swallowed, hard. "Sizhui... Jingyi said you were stabbed. Are – are you in pain?"

Sizhui opened his eyes again, shaking his head slightly. "It's – well, it hurts a little, but Qing-jie gave me something for the pain, just – just before..." he looked away, and his breathing became a little quicker, and Wei Wuxian squeezed his hand.

"It's okay, A-Yuan, it's over now. It's over now. We're going to take you home, and you're going to be okay."

"I thought, I thought they were going to take it," Sizhui whispered, tears streaming down his cheeks as he glanced towards Lan Zhan. "Xian-gege, they – I – he was going to let them, he was going to let them because, because of *me*, and – and I thought –"

“Hey, hey,” Wei Wuxian murmured, wiping the tears from his son’s cheeks. “It’s over. They didn’t take it. And none of this is your fault, Sizhui. None of it.”

“Do... do you think Zewu Jun’s going to be okay?”

“I think *everyone*’s going to be okay,” said Wei Wuxian firmly, combing through Sizhui’s hair with his fingers. “We’re going to make sure of it.” He paused. “Are you sure you’re not in pain? I can see if there’s anything more I can give you?” When Sizhui shook his head, Wei Wuxian steeled himself, and asked, “Where... where is it? The wound?”

Sizhui put his hand over his stomach, and Wei Wuxian’s felt the urge to burst into tears. Instead, he leant down, wrapping his arms around Sizhui in the most careful hug of his life. At once, Sizhui flung his arms around Wei Wuxian’s neck, clinging onto him tightly, and Wei Wuxian closed his eyes.

“It’s okay, A-Yuan,” he whispered. “You’re going to be okay, now, it’s all going to be okay.”

“I – I know I’m going to be okay,” Sizhui whispered back, his voice choked with tears. “You’re here.”

Wei Wuxian’s breath caught in his throat, but he managed to nod, and to resist the urge to hug Sizhui closer and risk aggravating his wound. “That’s right,” he said, his voice utterly mangled by the lump in his throat. “I’m here.”

It was an incredibly uncomfortable position, leaning over the bed like that, but Wei Wuxian would have happily stayed like that forever – or at least until Lan Zhan came to join them – if Wen Qing hadn’t spoken softly behind him.

“Wei Wuxian...”

He stood up, keeping his hand entwined with Sizhui’s, and turned to look at her. To his surprise, she looked hesitant, almost wary, and panic set his heart to race at once.

“What’s wrong?” he demanded, looking towards the back of the room. There was no obvious sign of something wrong – Lan Xichen had been guided down to sit on Lan Zhan’s abandoned bed, and Lan Zhan was sitting beside him, speaking quietly and intently with Nie Mingjue and Lan Qiren. Wei Wuxian looked back at Wen Qing, who winced slightly.

“I...” she said, and then she closed her eyes for a moment. When they opened again, her expression was open, clear with grief and pain. “I stalled for as long as I could.” Confused, Wei Wuxian frowned, and Wen Qing blinked. “The... the surgery, I –”

Wei Wuxian couldn’t help but choke. “Wen Qing! I know that, of course I know that! Are *you* hurt?”

She shook her head slightly, pursing her lips. “Wei Wuxian, I –”

Unable to help himself, Wei Wuxian reached out to snatch Wen Qing into a one-armed hug. She stiffened in surprise, but then immediately melted into the embrace, pressing her face

into his shoulder. He hugged her as close as he could, while still keeping a grip on Sizhui's hand with the other.

"I'm so glad you're okay," Wei Wuxian murmured in Wen Qing's ear. "I was so worried... I'm so sorry, Wen Qing. I'm so sorry. You were – Lotus Pier – you were supposed to be safe, I –"

"Wei Wuxian," Wen Qing said sharply, though her arms tightened around him. "Don't be an idiot." Then, with a slight gasp, she pulled away slightly. "Mo Xuanyu – he's still in the dungeon, he –"

"Jiang Cheng and the Peacock have gone to get him," Wei Wuxian promised, and Wen Qing relaxed slightly. Suddenly, Wei Wuxian felt very cold. "Wait... Is Xue Yang down there with him? Because he's not here..."

"I don't know," said Wen Qing, her eyes tight with worry. "He wasn't when I left, but Meng Yao was. He's been drugged, and he was chained to the far wall, but he was there."

Wei Wuxian frowned darkly. He'd almost forgotten about the younger Meng Yao. "Is he hurt? Mo Xuanyu, not Meng Yao."

The worry in Wen Qing's eyes grew steeper. "He wasn't when I left him..."

"Okay," said Wei Wuxian slowly. "Okay. Can Zewu Jun move?"

"With help, but Sizhui can't – he can't walk, at least," said Wen Qing, looking down at Sizhui, who looked unacceptably guilty. "He shouldn't even sit up, not yet."

Swallowing, Wei Wuxian forced himself to meet her eye. "How bad was it?"

Wen Qing looked away. "The sword went right through him. I was able to do enough that it wouldn't do too much damage to carry him, now, as long as he's not jostled too much, and he stays mainly in a horizontal position."

The sword went right through him.

The sword went right through him.

The world span in shades of red, and black –

And Sizhui's hand squeezed his. "Xian-gege?"

Wei Wuxian closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Then, he nodded. "And Lan Zhan? Lan Zhan's able to move?"

"Mm. He is in some pain, and I don't think it would be wise for him to fly alone, but he can move."

"Good," Wei Wuxian said, even though his brain screamed that it wasn't good, that Lan Zhan was in pain and Jin Guangyao was already dead and he should have dragged it out longer,

and – “Let’s go and find Jiang Cheng and Mo Xuanyu, and get the hell out of here.”

A murmur of agreement ran around the room, and Wei Wuxian looked down at Sizhui.  
“Okay, A-Yuan, brace yourself.”

Sizhui nodded, pursing his lips shut, and Wei Wuxian leant down, lifting his son up off of the bed. As he moved, Sizhui hissed slightly, and Wei Wuxian winced.

“Are you okay?” he asked gently, and Sizhui looked up at him, smiling tearfully.

“I’m okay.”

“Good.” Wei Wuxian crossed the room, and Nie Mingjue and Lan Qiren both straightened.

“Wei-gongzi,” said Nie Mingjue, raising his eyebrows slightly. “I only saw half of what you have done here, but you must be exhausted. I can help you, if you wish.” He nodded towards Sizhui, and Wei Wuxian managed to give a weak smile.

“Thank you, but I’m alright,” he said, standing beside Lan Zhan.

“Speaking of what was done here,” said Lan Qiren tightly, and Wei Wuxian braced himself. This was very much not a good place to get angry, not with Sizhui injured in his arms. “I think, for the sake of not repeating a history that hasn’t yet come to pass, it would be best if we keep what happened here between only those who already know the truth about the time travel. I fear that otherwise misunderstandings may arise.” Wei Wuxian let out a breath he hadn’t known he was holding, and he nodded. Lan Qiren nodded back, and then looked at the corpse of Jin Guangyao, his lips pursing slightly. “Though the punishment seems disproportionate to his crimes.” He met Wei Wuxian’s eyes, and for the first time in Wei Wuxian’s life, understanding passed between them. “I think it was entirely too merciful.”

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! I hope that you enjoyed that chapter, please do let me know what you think! I absolutely adore all your comments, and I can't tell you how grateful I am for the love you've shown this story! Until next time, please take care!

# Chapter 33

## Chapter Notes

Thank you for the lovely response to the last chapter! I hope you all enjoy this one!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The world was falling down around Xichen, and everything he knew was shattering, but somehow, he was still upright. Not standing – there was no strength in his legs to stand, and his uncle and brother seemed to know that – they had manoeuvred him to sit on the end of a bed. As Lan Qiren turned to Wei Wuxian and declared, unbelievably, that Jin Guangyao's death was too merciful, Lan Xichen looked away – and he saw the blood on the sheets just inches from his fingertips.

This was the bed Wangji had been tied to, the bed where Wen Qing had nearly taken his golden core away –

Xichen lurched forward, and threw up.

“Xiongzhang!” Wangji's voice was tight, and his hand closed around Xichen's upper arm, even as another hand rested on Xichen's back.

“Shit...” Wei Wuxian murmured.

“It's alright,” said Wen Qing smoothly, and the hand on his back rubbed up and down carefully. It felt like Nie Mingjue. “The drugs are still in your system – your body is still fighting it. It's alright.”

Xichen nodded shakily. She had said that already.

She had said that, and Wangji and Mingjue and Shufu had said other things –

They had said that the A-Yao that lay dead across from Xichen was from the future, that he wanted Wangji's golden core, that he was going to *kill* Wangji to convince Xichen to run away with him, that there was so much more to the story and they would tell him soon, and it didn't – it didn't make sense.

He looked up. At A-Yao.

His eyes were open. Wide, doe-like, unseeing. Lines of blood ran down from his eyes and his nose and his ears and his mouth, and his chest was utterly soaked. Blood had pooled on the bed, and a little was seeping over the edge, dropping to the ground in slow, uneven drips. Xichen felt his lip waver – or maybe it was all of him that was shaking, or maybe it was the whole world.

“Xiongzhang,” murmured Wangji, and he squeezed Xichen’s hand again.

Xichen stared down dumbly. His fingers were still entwined with his little brother’s – Wangji hadn’t tried to let go yet. Xichen couldn’t remember the last time he had held his brother’s hand. Ever since they were children, ever since their mother passed away, Wangji had shied away from touch, even Xichen’s. The last time Wangji had hugged him had been during the Sunshot Campaign, when he returned from indoctrination in Qishan.

Today, though, Wangji had hugged him closer than he ever had, and he had squeezed his arm and held his hand, and he was still holding his hand, and it was greater comfort than Xichen could ever have imagined, but it also worried him. How afraid had Wangji been, to cling so desperately to him now? He thought he knew the answer, and it did not help with the nausea.

“We should go,” said Wei Wuxian quietly, and Xichen looked up at him sharply. The boy Wangji had referred to as Sizhui was cradled in his arms, watching Xichen with an expression of deep concern, though he gave a little smile when Xichen met his eyes.

“Go?” Xichen echoed, the words hurting his throat, his eyes returning to A-Yao’s body.

“Xichen,” said Mingjue gently, “he’s right.”

“Mn,” said Wangji, even as Xichen shook his head.

“I – I don’t understand,” he rasped. It wasn’t what he meant to say, but it was what came out, and he found that he couldn’t stop shaking his head. “I don’t – why, why would A-Yao – why – I don’t – How? You said, you said that’s not – that isn’t – that the future? *How?*”

Somehow, Wangji interpreted his question well enough to answer it. “Sixteen years from now, Jin Guangyao put you, Wei Ying, Jiang Wanyin and Nie Huaisang into an impossible situation. Trapped with you were his nephew Jinling, Ouyang Zizhen, Lan Jingyi, and my son, Lan Sizhui. To save them, the four of you activated an array to send them back in time, but Jin Guangyao came back with them.”

The pounding ache in Xichen’s head grew sharp behind his eyes, and he was sure that it shouldn’t be this hard to process his brother’s words. “Lan Jingyi... not little A-Yu?”

“Nineteen-year-old A-Yu, yes,” said Wangji, but then his face darkened. “Though Jin Guangyao did attempt to harm the younger A-Yu, Jingyi was too quick for him.”

Waves of confusion and horror hit Xichen fast and hard, but then he processed something else that Wangji had said, and everything suddenly felt very still. He blinked, looking at his brother.

“Your son?”

“Mn,” said Wangji, the faintest shadow of a smile tugged at his lips as he nodded up at the boy in Wei Wuxian’s arms. “Xiongzhang, this is your nephew, Lan Yuan, courtesy name Sizhui.”



Eyes widening, Xichen looked back at Sizhui, who was blushing slightly, smiling shyly from Wei Wuxian's arms. "I'm glad to see you, Bobo. I mean, Zewu Jun."

Xichen couldn't breathe, but unlike everything else he was experiencing, it wasn't a bad feeling. He felt a little lightheaded, but there was a warmth nudging its way into his aching heart, something that felt like joy and surprise and affection. He looked from Wangji to Sizhui, and then to Shufu and to Mingjue, and then back at Sizhui.

"Hello," he whispered, because it would be rude not to say anything, and he didn't know what else to say, other than to turn to Wangji and utter, "I – I have a nephew?"

Wangji nodded, glancing at Sizhui with an expression Xichen had never seen before. For a split second, Xichen wondered who Sizhui's mother was, if Wangji had taken a wife in the future, but that was less believable than the idea of time travel. Then he took in the tenderness in the way Wei Wuxian held Sizhui, the way his expression mirrored Wangji's.

But the child couldn't be Wei Wuxian's biologically, unless *Wei Wuxian* had a wife that Xichen didn't know about, which was possible – though extremely disappointing. But no, the way Wangji had hugged Wei Wuxian, the way they had clung to each other – that had looked like they finally got themselves together. Surely Wangji would not do so if Wei Wuxian was married?

As if reading his confusion, Wei Wuxian grinned. "He was mine first," he said. "The youngest survivor of the Wens kept at Qiongg Pass. The first time around, when I got ambushed on the way to Rulan's one-month things... went very wrong. Lan Zhan took A-Yuan in when I was gone."

Ah. That made sense. Except no, that didn't make any sense at all, because that meant there was a child at the camps at Qiongg Pass, presumably more than one, and if there was only one survivor that meant –

"There is much to know of what happened at Qiongg Pass," said Lan Qiren, his tone demanding Xichen's attention, though when their eyes met his uncle's expression was gentle. "You can hear of it later. For now, it will be best to get you, Wangji, and Sizhui out of here. You are all injured. Jiang-zongzhu and Jin Zixuan-gongzi are currently searching the dungeons for Mo Xuanyu, another of Jin Guangyao's captives, and as soon as we meet them we can leave this place entirely. I don't think it will do any of you any good to stay in this room a minute longer."

"What... what about A-Yao?" Xichen asked, his eyes lingering on the body for a moment before he looked back to Shufu. "If this – if this Jin Guangyao is from the future, then what of the man I know?" Hope and dread fought over his heart, and he felt his fingers tighten around Wangji's. "Is he gone too?"

Lan Qiren pursed his lips. "We do not know."

"He disappeared five days ago," said Nie Mingjue, "at the same time you did. Chances are he's here, potentially in the dungeons, or... he may also be dead, Xichen. We don't know."

“Though he is not innocent,” said Wangji, his voice surprisingly cold.

“If he’s in the dungeons, Jiang Cheng and the Peacock will find him,” said Wei Wuxian firmly. “The Peacock was firmly in the ‘let’s let him try and explain himself and give him a decent trial’ camp, so if they find him alive I reckon he’ll stay that way, for now. However far he has gone, I don’t think it’s anywhere near as far as that one went.” He nodded towards the corpse on the other bed. In his arms, Sizhui shuddered visibly, and Wei Wuxian’s expression grew darker. “That’s it, I’m getting A-Yuan out of this damned room. Ah, Wen Qing – could you grab Chenqing for me please?”

“We are coming with you,” said Wangji softly, standing up. A stab of panic rose in Xichen at the thought that his brother had decided it was time to let go, and he tried desperately to force it down. Of course Wangji couldn’t hold his hand forever, and it was not like he would disappear if he let go. But then, Wangji’s grip tightened. “Xiongzhang, come. We will send disciples back, for the bodies. Later.”

Xichen swallowed, and then nodded. Mingjue looped Xichen’s arm over his shoulder, taking Xichen’s weight and helping him onto his feet. Involuntarily, Xichen felt his hand grip Wangji’s tighter, and he winced slightly, sending his brother a look of apology, but when he did he saw tears glistening in his eyes.

“Wangji,” he whispered, but he didn’t know what else to say, and his brother closed his eyes, shaking his head slightly.

“I missed you, Xiongzhang,” he murmured, his voice so quiet that even Mingjue would have struggled to hear it, but Xichen didn’t just hear the words. Wangji always spoke with so much more than words, if you knew him well enough to hear it. The words were ‘I missed you,’ but Xichen also heard ‘I was afraid’ and ‘I thought you were gone’ and ‘I love you,’ and Xichen gave a trembling smile.

“I love you, too, Wangji,” he replied, just as quietly, and Wangji nodded.

Xichen still didn’t really understand anything. He still felt sick and aching and sore, and he was still reeling from what he had seen and heard, and he still felt like the world was collapsing around him. But with his brother’s hand in his, and Mingjue holding him upright, the gradual realisation that he was now an uncle, Xichen felt that even if this *was* the end of his world, he might just survive it.

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The deeper the corridor to the dungeon went, the higher Jin Zixuan’s nerves rose. He had never been claustrophobic, but something about the close-set stone walls and the grim smell of damp and rot made his skin crawl. There were torches burning in brackets on the wall, but they were few and far between, and the tunnel was stretching on far longer than he would have expected.

Eventually, Jiang Cheng skidded to a halt, turning to face a door. Zixuan might have missed it himself – it was as dark and grey as the stone wall – but when Jiang Cheng raised his hand towards it nearly a dozen wards glowed menacingly on its surface.

Jiang Cheng turned to Zixuan. “The guard said that Mo Xuanyu was in the cell at the end of the corridor, but that doesn’t mean there’s no one in here. He mentioned Wen Qing and Hanguang Jun, but Sizhui...”

Jin Zixuan nodded, pursing his lips as he stared at the wards. “It looks like it’ll take a few minutes to take those down.”

“I’ll do it,” said Jiang Cheng. “You go and find Mo Xuanyu, I’ll catch up.”

Zixuan nodded again, slipping past Jiang Cheng and striding on, moving faster than he had before. The corridor was still sloping downwards, and at times there were even stairs cut into the floor, and he was sure that they were deep underground by the time he turned a corner, and came to a large dungeon door. It was reinforced with iron chains, and with bolts thicker than Suihua’s hilt, and covered with wards and talismans – and it was guarded by two cultivators in Jin robes.

Fury tightened Zixuan’s chest, and the guards’ eyes widened him. He knew them both, by name at least – Jin Huizhong was a distant cousin of his, and Zheng Chang was the illegitimate son of one of his father’s subordinates. They exchanged a glance, then drew their swords. Zixuan raised his eyebrows.

“Are you sure that’s what you want to do?” he asked quietly, looking each of them in the eye. “Perhaps you think you have no choice – you have already betrayed Lanling Jin, and your clan leader, and you have already aided evil against all the clans. What is attempted murder of your clan heir on top of that?” He paused, thinking of Su Guozhi. “If Jin Guangyao has threatened you into complying, will see that you are not punished unjustly.”

“We will not betray Lianfang Zun!” declared Jin Huizhong, glaring darkly at Jin Zixuan. “He is the only member of the inner Jin family willing to think well of those without perfect family histories or dirty reputations!” Zheng Chang nodded emphatically.

“I see,” said Jin Zixuan. “And that is enough for you to be happy to imprison a child? Are you aware that he, too, is the son of Jin Guangshan?” He shook his head. “I’ve lost my patience. Either surrender now, or attack, if you think you’re capable of it.”

The men exchanged another glance, and then charged, and Zixuan sighed, deflecting their blows with ease and drawing Suihua across their throats. They fell, crumpling to the ground like abandoned papermen, and Zixuan reached down to snatch the circle of keys from Zheng Chang’s belt.

As it turned out, however, he didn’t need any of them to open the great, wooden door – as soon as he slid all the bolts free, he was able to push open the door, and he walked carefully inside. There was a large cell in the back of the dungeon, and through its barred door, Zixuan could see a man slumped on the ground, looking up at him weakly.

His gut curled uncomfortably.

Meng Yao.

A spike of panic rose within him – he was not looking for Meng Yao, he was looking for Mo Xuanyu, and if Mo Xuanyu wasn't here –

But then he saw someone else, huddled in the far back corner of the cell, and he breathed out. The boy was curled up so small that he was easy to miss, his dark, dirty robes blending in with the slate grey stone, and his head hung down low, covering his face with scruffy dark hair. As Zixuan stepped closer, the boy's head rose just a fraction, and he caught a glimpse of frightened, grey eyes peeking out at him from beneath his dark hair.

“Are-” Zixuan blurted out, and the boy flinched. Jin Zixuan winced, making his voice slower and gentler as he moved towards the cell door, trying each of the keys in the lock. “Are you Mo Xuanyu?”

The boy started to nod, but then he gasped and shook his head, pressing himself further into the corner. “No, no, I'm nobody!”

Jin Zixuan paused. The first key wasn't fitting in the lock, but his hand froze on the second. “You're nobody?”

The boy nodded vigorously, his hair flying around his face. “Nobody!”

“I see,” said Zixuan slowly, trying the second key, and then when that didn't work, he tried the third. The lock turned with a satisfying click, and Zixuan pulled open the door. The boy flinched, cringing back, and Zixuan paused. He didn't want to scare the child any further, but he didn't know how to avoid it. He wracked his brain for what Yanli would do, and then slowly crouched down, staying by the door to give the boy space. He was almost completely certain that this *was* Mo Xuanyu – he'd had started nodding after all, and Zixuan didn't know who else he could be, but he tried to play along. “Well, I'm here to rescue Mo Xuanyu, and take him home. Do you know where he is?”

To his horror, tears filled the boy's eyes, and he shook his head.

“Please don't be scared,” said Zixuan, putting Suihua on the ground and holding up his hands. “I'm not going to hurt you. I'm not going to hurt Mo Xuanyu. My name is Jin Zixuan – Mo Xuanyu is my little brother.”

The boy's eyes darted to Meng Yao, and his lower lip wobbled. “I – I'm Nobody – he said if I remembered I'm Nobody and that I mean nothing then maybe I don't have to – to –”

Anger flared hot in Zixuan's chest, but he forced himself to hold it back. “Who said that? Him?” He pointed at Meng Yao, and the boy shook his head slightly.

“His twin,” he whispered. “Jin Guangyao.”

Jin Zixuan took a deep breath, counting to five. “He said that you're nobody, and you mean nothing?”

“I haven't forgotten it, I haven't!”

“I know,” Jin Zixuan said, carefully. “But if I asked Wen Qing, would *she* say your name is Mo Xuanyu? You can’t get in trouble for telling me that.”

The boy bit his lip, and then nodded. A sense of relief rippled through Zixuan, even though he’d already been fairly sure, and he smiled slightly.

“Then I’m very glad I’ve found you,” he said honestly. “I’ve been worried. I heard that you met my wife, Yanli? She’s been very upset, and very worried about you, too. You were supposed to be safe in Lotus Pier, and we’re very sorry that you weren’t. But I’m here to take you back to your A-Niang.” Remembering how Mo Xuanyu had reached Lotus Pier in the first place, Jin Zixuan added, “I’m here with Wei Wuxian – he’s looking for Wen Qing now, but he’s here too, to bring you back.”

For the first time, a flicker of hope sparked in Mo Xuanyu’s eyes. “Wei Wuxian?”

Jin Zixuan nodded. “Yes.” He paused, thinking carefully about his next words. “I don’t think you’re nobody, Xuanyu – too many of us care about you and want you home for that. But, if we do run into Jin Guangyao on the way out, then I will say you’re nobody too, okay? We’ll make sure you’re safe. Will you come with me? Please?”

Slowly, aching slowly, Mo Xuanyu uncurled from his little ball, his eyes flickering towards Meng Yao. He got to his feet, and then tiptoed around the edge of the cell, well out of Meng Yao’s reach and then he stopped just outside of Zixuan’s. There, he hesitated, and swallowed.

“How – how do I know you’re really Jin Zixuan?” he asked. “That it’s, that it’s not a trick?”

Zixuan glanced down at Suihua, which would be proof enough for any cultivator, but there was no chance that Xuanyu would recognise it. He pursed his lips, trying to think. “I don’t have any proof that you would recognise – this is Suihua, my sword, but I know you probably don’t recognise it. I... I know you must be afraid. That you don’t know what to do. And I know that m- that our father hasn’t been good to you. But I would like to try to be a good brother, and I would like to try to keep you safe.”

He held out his hand, and Mo Xuanyu flinched away, staring at him. Then, after a long moment, he reached out, and slipped his little hand into Zixuan’s. His skin was ice cold, and his hand was trembling, but still, Zixuan smiled, closing his hand gently around his brother’s.

“Thank you,” said Zixuan seriously. “May I call you Xuanyu?” Xuanyu nodded, and Zixuan smiled again. “Thank you. You can call me whatever makes you comfortable. Zixuan or Dage or Gege, it’s up to you, okay?” Xuanyu nodded again, looking towards Meng Yao.

“Are you here to rescue him too?” he asked suspiciously, and Jin Zixuan raised eyebrows.

“To be honest, I’m not sure. I wasn’t expecting him to be here.”

“Wen Qing-jie said he’d done bad things too,” said Mo Xuanyu, his eyes narrowing as he stared at Meng Yao. “That Jin Guangyao was worse but that one’s done bad things as well.”

“He has,” said Zixuan, sighing heavily, and forcing himself to turn his attention back to Meng Yao.

Despite everything, he felt a flicker of sympathy. Meng Yao’s hands were chained to the wall behind him, and he looked quite unwell – he was pale and shivering, his hair plastered to his wan, sweaty face, and he’d made no effort to sit up, instead staring up at Zixuan from the floor with half-closed eyes. He was filthy, one of his hands was bandaged in a way that suggested he might be missing a finger or two, and the expression on his face...

He looked like he was staring at his executioner, his eyes dull, hopeless.

Zixuan sighed. “He has done bad things, but nothing so wrong that he doesn’t deserve a trial, and the chance to defend himself. After all, he is our brother.”

Mo Xuanyu made an unconvinced humming sound as Meng Yao blinked in apparent surprise. Xuanyu opened his mouth, but then they heard the sound of approaching footprints and he gasped instead, his grip pinching Zixuan’s hand. Zixuan stood up, keeping Xuanyu behind him slightly, but it was just Jiang Cheng, who shook his head as he came nearer.

“There was no-one there,” he said. “Did you find him?”

Zixuan smiled slightly, shifting out of the way to allow Jiang Cheng a peek at Xuanyu. “Mo Xuanyu, this is Jiang-zongzhu – he is Yanli and Wei Wuxian’s little brother.” It was the second part of the sentence that seemed to coax him to peep around Jin Zixuan’s side. “Jiang Cheng, this is my brother, Mo Xuanyu.”

“Thank god,” Jiang Cheng breathed, smiling slightly. “Hello, Mo-gongzi. I’m glad we’ve found you. Shall we go?”

“There’s a slight complication,” said Zixuan, stepping out of the cell and gently tugging Xuanyu with him, allowing Jiang Cheng to see Meng Yao. At once, Jiang Cheng’s face curled up in disgust.

“Oh, fuck. What are we going to do about that?”

“I don’t think we should leave him here,” said Zixuan, and Jiang Cheng turned his scowl to Zixuan. Unfazed, Zixuan continued. “It’s too dangerous. He could be rescued, or die, and I still say he deserves a trial, in the least.”

“He tried to kill my brother,” said Jiang Cheng tightly. “And you!”

Mo Xuanyu breathed in sharply, looking up at Zixuan, who sighed tiredly.

“I’m not sure whether it’s that simple,” he said. “And like I said, he deserves a trial. We agreed on that.”

“Urgh, fine.” Jiang Cheng scowled, striding into the cell and slicing Sandu through the chains binding Meng Yao to the wall. “Get up.”

Meng Yao didn’t move.

“He hasn’t talked or moved much,” said Mo Xuanyu, “Qing-jie said that she thinks he’s probably been drugged.”

“Great,” Jiang Cheng muttered, looking at Mo Xuanyu clinging so tightly to Zixuan’s hand. Then, he rolled his eyes and grumbled under his breath, dragging Meng Yao up off the floor and hauling him over his shoulder. “Let’s get out of here, shall we?”

Jin Zixuan nodded, leading Mo Xuanyu out the door. When they stepped outside, Xuanyu gasped, his fingernails digging into Zixuan’s palm as he cringed into his side. Zixuan flinched. He’d forgotten about the dead guards.

“It’s okay!” he promised quickly, squeezing Xuanyu’s hand. “Close your eyes – I’ll tell you when you can look.”

Looking terrified, Xuanyu closed his eyes, and his voice trembled when he asked, “They’re, they’re bad guys, right?”

“They’re bad guys,” Zixuan promised, hurrying Xuanyu around the corner. As soon as the corpses were out of sight, he said, “You can open your eyes, now.”

Xuanyu sniffed, obeying without a word. They moved quickly, making their way up the corridor, and then they heard footsteps racing towards them. At once, Jiang Cheng all but dropped Meng Yao to the floor, moving in front of Zixuan and Xuanyu.

A man ran around the corner, stopping dead in his tracks when he saw them. He looked young, and a smile spread across his face as he saw them, but Mo Xuanyu breathed in sharply, pressing close to Zixuan, and Jiang Cheng drew Sandu.

“Xue Yang,” he growled, and Zixuan stiffened, shifting further in front of Xuanyu.

“That’s me!” the man sang, and then he sighed dramatically. “So, it seems that grabbing *that* little human shield’s going to be a little trickier than I thought, huh?” he said, pointing his unsheathed sword at Xuanyu.

Instinctively, Zixuan twisted and snatched Xuanyu up off of the ground, and the boy gave a startled squeak, though he also locked his legs around Zixuan’s waist, and his hands around his chest. In the same moment, Zixuan drew his sword, pointing it at Xue Yang.

Xue Yang laughed, shaking his head slightly. He looked between Zixuan and Jiang Cheng, his eyes narrowing on Zidian, and then his head tilted slightly, as though he was listening to something in the distance. Then, he scrunched up his nose and shook his head. “Yeah – nope.”

With that, he turned and fled up the corridor.

“Fuck!” Jiang Cheng growled, lurching forward, but then the hair on the back of Zixuan’s neck stood up and the stench of sulphur hit the back of his throat, and he cried out.

“Jiang Cheng!”

An explosion rocked the corridor and Zixuan was thrown back against the wall, his arms tightening around Mo Xuanyu as they fell. The torches flickered out, engulfing the tunnel in darkness. Zixuan hit the ground hard and rolled over, curling around Xuanyu as best he could to shield him from the rock and rubble flying around them. Zixuan felt a chunk of stone hit his back, and another clip the side of his head, and the pain escaped his mouth in a hiss. Beneath him, Xuanyu whimpered, cringing as the stone beneath them shook, and Zixuan gritted his teeth and braced himself to be buried.

But then the shaking stopped, and the last clattering of the rocks fell silent.

The tunnel was silent.

Zixuan took a deep breath, but the dust settling in the hallway struck the back of his throat and he choked, twisting away from Xuanyu as he coughed. His brother gave a frightened whine, his fists clutching at Zixuan's robes, and Zixuan shifted his arm to hold him close.

"Are you hurt?" he rasped, as soon as he had stopped coughing long enough to speak. "Xuanyu, are you hurt?"

Xuanyu shook his head into Zixuan's chest. "N-no, but I can't, I can't see! I – I can't see!"

"Okay," Zixuan breathed, pushing himself upright with his right arm even while he hugged Xuanyu closer with his left. "It's okay – the lights have gone out, that's all." He took another deep breath, and called, "Jiang Cheng?"

There was silence, apart from Xuanyu's quick, frightened breathing, and Jin Zixuan's heart twisted.

"Jiang Cheng!" he yelled, fumbling in his chest for a talisman. "Jiang Cheng!"

"Ow."

*Oh, thank god.*

"Jiang Cheng, are you alright?"

A flame lit at the end of the talisman, and Zixuan grabbed a torch from the wall, relighting it quickly. As its warm light spilt into the corridor he saw that the tunnel had completely collapsed, and Jiang Cheng was propping himself up on his elbows just centimetres away from the pile of rubble. There was blood dribbling down the side of his face, and he was wincing, but when Zixuan reached his side and seized his chin, he could see that Jiang Cheng's pupils were of equal size.

"Get off," Jiang Cheng grumbled, batting Zixuan's hand away and pressing his own hand to his head. "Who'd you think you are that you can manhandle me like that?"

"Your brother-in-law," Zixuan replied bluntly. "Are you alright?"

Jiang Cheng winced, rubbing at his head. "Fine. I'm fine."



“Uh huh.” Zixuan didn’t bother to even try to sound convinced. “Well, this is inconvenient.”

“Are, are we trapped?” whispered Xuanyu.

“Uh, yes,” Zixuan admitted, “but we’re going to get out of here.”

“How?” Xuanyu whimpered. “How? We’re – we’re *buried!*”

“Temporarily,” Zixuan said, and Xuanyu stared incredulously at him. “I promise.”

“He’s trying to stall us,” growled Jiang Cheng, clambering to his feet. Zidian sparked on his wrist – probably in response to Jiang Cheng’s anger, but Zixuan spoke up nevertheless.

“Uh, Jiang Cheng, I don’t think hitting the rubble with the Zidian is the best way out of this. We don’t want the tunnel to cave in further.”

Jiang Cheng’s nostrils flared as he breathed in, staring up at the ceiling. It looked like he was counting. “I am aware of that, Zixuan,” he said through his teeth. “Fuck... He’s going to get away.”

“I’d rather that he get away and we all walk out of here in one piece,” said Zixuan. “We can track him down later.”

Jiang Cheng nodded, and then paused, raising his eyebrows. “Are you just going to stand there holding the kid, or are you going to help me shift this rock?”

Zixuan rolled his eyes, and Xuanyu giggled slightly, before cutting himself off with a gasp. Jiang Cheng’s expression softened slightly.

“Would you like to help, too?” he asked gently. “You can move the smaller ones, on the outside. But you don’t have to – it’s not your fault we’re in this mess, but you can if you want.”

“I can help,” said Xuanyu, and Zixuan lowered him onto the floor carefully.

“Don’t think I missed the implication that it this is my fault,” he said to Jiang Cheng, following his brother over to the rubble.

“I’m sure it is your fault somehow,” muttered Jiang Cheng. “I’m sure you did something.”

Xuanyu snickered again, and Zixuan rolled his eyes. “You get used to him,” he promised, preparing to send a spiritual butterfly to the others and Jiang Cheng scowled.

“Let me tell you, Xuanyu, older brothers are the worst. They show no respect, and they always think they know best, and they will always do dumb things to take care of you. They’re the best and the worst all rolled into one, but mainly the worst.”

“Yes, well, this older brother has just sent a message to *your* older brother to see if they’re finished, and if they can come and help us dig from the other side. So, we may be annoying but we’re far from useless.”

Jiang Cheng sighed. “Urgh... it’s a good thing Wei Wuxian got stuck in that cave with the murder tortoise or he’d never let me live this down.”

“Murder tortoise?” Xuanyu gasped, his eyes going very wide. “Did the Yiling Patriarch fight the Xuanwu of Slaughter?”

“Well, he wasn’t the Yiling Patriarch then, but yes,” said Jiang Cheng, his face red as he shifted a chunk of rock almost as big as Xuanyu. “Yes, like an idiot Wei Wuxian got stuck in a cave and then went inside a murder tortoise. Zixuan and I were there too, but we weren’t dumb enough to get stuck.”

Zixuan was just about to make a pointed comment (*not* a complaint) about Jiang Cheng’s grumbling, when Xuanyu said, “What happened, Da-ge?” and Zixuan’s heart soared – and he very nearly dropped the boulder he was holding onto his foot.

## Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed this chapter! Please do let me know what you thought, I love hearing from you! Until next time, please take care.

# Chapter 34

## Chapter Notes

Thank you for all the lovely comments for the last chapter! I hope you enjoy this one!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It certainly looked the part, this place Jin Guangyao had spirited Sizhui and the others away to. Walls of grim, grey stone rose up from grim, grey ground, making the manor almost like an extension of the mountain. Spells and talismans had been carved into the walls, so strong Jinling could feel their static against his skin even fifty feet away. The land that must have once been outer gardens to the house was overgrown, but nothing alive seemed willing to touch the walls – no grass, or flowers, or weeds.

In the shelter of the nearby woods, Jinling was crouched behind a bush, holding his breath. He wanted to go in. To vault over the walls, in through the courtyards, to go room by room until he found Sizhui and Hanguang Jun and the others, to make sure everyone got out. He wanted to help his A-Die, and Jiujiu, and Wei Wuxian.

Zizhen had convinced him to wait.

“We’re more use to them as backup,” he’d said, annoyingly sensibly. “If something goes wrong, we can jump in with the element of surprise.”

So instead of charging in, they had hidden themselves in the woodland by the western wall and waited. Jinling didn’t know exactly how long it had been, but it felt like a lifetime. The only proof he had to the contrary was that the sun looked to be in exactly the same position it had been when they’d landed, that the unsettling shadows of the trees hadn’t shifted. For a little while, he’d thought he’d heard the faint sound of a flute, but if he had it was now long gone.

“It’s so quiet...” he muttered, and Zizhen nodded. His face was tight with concern, his eyebrows furrowed low.

“I don’t know if that’s good or bad,” Zizhen replied quietly. “Maybe we should get a closer look?”

Jinling nodded, creeping forward, but Zizhen grabbed his wrist. “Wait, just – just a second. Jinling, do you know where we are?”

Unease shuddering down his spine, Jinling looked at Zizhen carefully. “South-west Qishan.”

Zizhen swallowed, and looked up at the manor. “Yes, but more specifically... I think this is the same place. Where – where he took us before.”

Memories flashed before Jinling's eyes hot and sharp and fast – the wagon, the knife held by Sizhui's eye, the dark wall, the darker hall, the dungeon, the blood – “What? Why do – how do – Why do you think that?”

Zizhen pursed his lips together, shaking his head. He looked very pale. “The stone... it looks familiar. The design of the door, the style of the talismans... and we weren't in the wagon for more than a night – we couldn't have gotten far, but we could have got *this* far.”

Jinling swallowed, glancing back at the walls. His stomach churned.

“I'm just saying,” Zizhen murmured. “If we get in there and it's... familiar... we can't freak out.” He looked at Jinling, who nodded, and then took a deep breath, standing up slightly. “Right. Let's –”

A figure in black leapt over the wall and Zizhen hissed, crouching back down low. A split second later, Jinling caught sight of the man's face, and loathing burnt in his chest. He tried to spring up, but Zizhen still had a hold of his wrist, and he tugged him back.

“Don't! It's too risky if he has the Yin Iron on him!” Zizhen hissed, his eyes wide, and Jinling scowled. Then, however, Zizhen said, “We should follow him – see where he's going!”

Jinling nodded, glancing back around, but Xue Yang had vanished. “Wait – were did he-”

“Go?” said a voice behind them, and they leapt to their feet, spinning around. Jinling drew his sword, but Zizhen couldn't – of course Zizhen couldn't – and Xue Yang laughed. “I know who you are. You're the pair that came back through time with the little Lans. Jin-gongzi told me *all* about you,” he said, stepping closer.

Jinling stiffened, raising his sword, and Zizhen stood very still beside him.

“He told me,” Xue Yang continued, “That one of you is that little Jin heir, Jin Ling – that *he's* the key to both the Jin and the Jiang. But the other one's nobody special – just some third child of some clan I wouldn't know the name of if Jin-gongzi hadn't told me.”

“Hey!” Jinling snapped, anger puffing up his chest. “How dare you?” Zizhen squeezed his wrist and shook his head slightly, and Xue Yang laughed.

“So I guess you're Ouyang Zizhen then?” he said, and before Jinling could say anything in response Xue Yang jerked his chin towards Zizhen. “In that case you're the one who'll want to know what just happened in that tunnel, little Jin.”

“What tunnel?” demanded Jinling.

“The one that just collapsed,” commented Xue Yang, grinning. “Right on top of Jin Zixuan, and Jiang-zongzhu, and that little Mo kid Su She brought back from Lotus Pier. Ah... what a disappointing death...”

Horror swallowed Jinling, surrounding him, suffocating him – it was like being buried beneath a mountain of heavy snow, overbearing, overwhelming, freezing cold, and he

couldn't breathe, he couldn't open his mouth or draw in air through his nose because he had frozen, and he couldn't breathe and –

*Jiujiu, A-Die, Jiujiu, A-Die, no, no, no, no –*

*No –*

“...believe you?” Zizhen, Zizhen was talking, and he wasn't buried, wasn't suffocating, and even as every part of his soul screamed, Jinling forced himself to concentrate, to stay silent.

Xue Yang shrugged. “You don't have to believe me. Doesn't stop it from being the truth. Though I don't think you've been honest with me – I change my guess – that one's the little Jin!” He pointed his sword at Jinling, and immediately Zizhen tugged him back, shifting in front of him.

Zizhen, who didn't even have a sword he could use properly.

Jinling sucked in a deep breath, trying desperately to get control of himself. He couldn't fall apart, not yet, not while they were still in danger, but –

*But –*

*A-Die, Jiujiu, A-Die, Jiujiu –*

“Either way, it doesn't matter to me,” said Xue Yang, pointing his sword at them. “But we don't really have much time.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Jinling caught sight of movement, and he turned –

His eyes widened.

“Zizhen!”

Standing among the trees behind was a ring of fierce corpses, many of them armed, some of them rotting. They weren't moving, or attacking – they were just watching, and Jinling's heart raced in his chest. Beside him, he could see Zizhen breathing steadily – too slowly, too deeply, attempting to hide his fear.

This was bad. This was very bad.

This was his fault.

“So,” said Xue Yang, “it's convenient I found you. I was going to grab the Mo kid as a shield, but one of you will do well. Tell me, are Hanguang Jun and Wei Wuxian as protective of you two as they are the little Lans?”

“We're not going anywhere with you!” Jinling snapped. “Wei Wuxian's tracked you down twice now, and if you even think about taking us, he'll do it again, and he'll kill you!”

“Oh, he’ll try,” said Xue Yang, nodding. He took another step closer, but they couldn’t step back, because then they’d be closer to the fierce corpses. “But where’s the fun in life without a little risk?”

“If you want a risk, what do you need shields for?” asked Zizhen sharply.

Xue Yang smirked at Zizhen for a moment, and then stepped closer, forcing them both to take a step further into the trees, closer to the corpses. “I only need one shield,” he said, and the way he was smiling made Jinling’s toes curl in his shoes. “One shield, and one prize. Jingongzi promised I could have Lan Sizhui, but, alas, it doesn’t look like that’s going to happen. He’ll be dead, by now. Su She will’ve stabbed him the second the Yiling Patriarch walked through the door. Anyway, it doesn’t really matter if it’s not Sizhui. I won’t get to see Hanguang Jun’s reaction, of course, which is a shame, but...” He paused, swinging his sword lazily between Jinling and Zizhen, and then pointing it at Jinling’s chest. “I think you’d scream pretty well, while I sliced your friend apart.”

It took Jinling a moment to figure out what Xue Yang was saying – he was stuck on the words ‘he’ll be dead, by now’, his heart still stricken by the thought that he could have already lost Sizhui and A-Die and Jiujiu – but then the last six words clicked.

Xue Yang wanted to kill Zizhen, he wanted to torture *Zizhen*, and he wanted Jinling to watch –

Jinling’s fury burst out of him in a wrenching roar of hate, and he lunged forward, aiming his sword for Xue Yang’s chest. With a wild laugh, the man blocked the strike and twisted, aiming a hit of his own towards Jinling even as he clicked his fingers, and the fierce corpses charged.

Twisting out of reach of Xue Yang’s blade, Jinling landed a strike on the man’s arm, but Xue Yang countered with a series of blows faster than lightening. It was all Jinling could do to block the blows, let alone try to fight back, and after just moments his back was pressed against a tree, and then Xue Yang’s sword caught his arm. If he was fighting with Suihua, muscle memory would have saved him, but this sword’s hilt was unfamiliar, and its shape wrong, and as the pain slashed across his arm the sword fell from his fingers.

At once, Xue Yang’s blade was at his throat, pushing painfully into his skin, and then the man leaned close, close enough that their noses almost touched, and it was too close, far too close –

“If you prefer to be the one to die you only have to ask,” Xue Yang sang softly, and Jinling grabbed the man’s blade as though his hands would be enough to stop it – and then he drove his knee up as hard as he could into Xue Yang’s crotch. Xue Yang choked, loosening his hold just enough for Jinling to wriggle away, snatching his borrowed sword from the floor.

There was a line of hot pain across his neck where Xue Yang’s sword had bitten in, but it could have been much worse, and he spared a second to look for Zizhen.

He was breathing heavily, one handheld out in front of him, and Jinling saw a fierce corpse on the ground by his feet, struck by some sort of talisman. As Jinling watched, Zizhen swung

a still-sheathed Suibian with a yell, and a wave of spiritual energy sent five fierce corpses flying backwards, but more were coming, and those who'd fallen just got up again –

And Xue Yang lurched at Jinling, and he had to leap out of the way, raising his sword against the onslaught. Jinling was a good swordsman, and he knew it, but Xue Yang was faster and crueller than anyone he'd ever sparred before, and soon he landed a hit on Jinling's side, and then his arm, and then his leg. Each hit was more painful than the last, and out of the corner of his eye Jinling could see Zizhen still moving, still fighting alone against fifteen fierce corpses.

Then, Jinling had an idea.

Probably a terrible one – most every decision he'd made in the last week was a terrible one – but neither he nor Zizhen could hold out forever, and his resolve tightened. He feigned a move with the sheath of his sword, and when Xue Yang moved to block it Jinling brought his sword down with as much force as he could.

And cut Xue Yang's left hand clean off.

The hand fell, the Yin Iron still clutched in its fingers, and in a flash Jinling swung his foot, kicking the hand as hard as he could. It flew off into the trees, and the fierce corpses paused. Jinling grinned.

And then Xue Yang lunged for him, and Jinling felt a sword bite into his side. He yelped, stumbling back. A chill ran down his spine as he saw that Xue Yang was *still smiling*, his eyes wild and bright and focused, and he pressed Jinling back, fighting as though he hadn't been injured at all, as if the stump on his wrist wasn't spraying blood all over the ground below them. Jinling leapt away, feigning retreat only to swing his sword at Xue Yang's neck. Xue Yang man ducked, the blade slicing across his forehead, blood pouring down his face, but he was still grinning coldly, and Jinling swallowed.

A wrenching cry drew Jinling's attention to the left, and his heart seized. One of the corpses was dragging Zizhen back by his hair, and then it plunged its head down, sinking its teeth into Zizhen's neck, and Zizhen *screamed* –

"Zizhen!" Jinling threw his sword as hard as he could, and it hit the head of the fierce corpse with a sickening thunk, and the creature fell away and Zizhen's knees buckled –

Xue Yang's sword swung towards Jinling's neck, and he barely blocked it with the sheath of his sword. He ducked out of the way of the next blow, holding his hand out in a desperate attempt to summon the sword back. It worked, but Xue Yang landed a blow on Jinling's hip and he cried out despite himself, staggering back. Blood oozed out of the wound at once, running in several lines down his hip and his leg, and Jinling's hand trembled around his sword.

"Zizhen!" he cried again, because he hadn't heard him, hadn't seen him, not since he fell, but he couldn't look because even now Xue Yang was pressing him back, back, back – "Zizhen!"

The rattling roar of a fierce corpse answered him, and Jinling's heart went cold. It – you couldn't become a fierce corpse just by being bitten by one unless – unless it killed you, unless it killed you, and –

“Zizhen!”

He dodged another of Xue Yang's blows and tried to land a strike of his own, but the man blocked him with a grin. Somewhere nearby, he heard another yell, one that sounded more human, more like Zizhen, but he couldn't see who it *was* and he looked –

And Xue Yang kicked him square in the chest, and the air left Jinling's lungs as he tried to put a foot back to keep from falling, but there was a large log behind him and he tripped, landing on his back on the forest floor. Without a second's hesitation, Xue Yang pounced, landing on Jinling's chest and driving out any air that had managed to stay in his lungs. Jinling swung up with his sword, but Xue Yang brought his own blade down, and Jinling yelled as the blade pierced the edge of his arm –

And pinned him to the ground.

The pain was white hot and blinding, but the horror was just as strong. Jinling tried to tug his arm free, but the sword was driven deep into the ground, and even as it cut into his arm it pinned his sleeve to the dirt and he couldn't *move*. Before he could hit Xue Yang with the sheath in his other hand the man had driven his knee down into Jinling's shoulder, holding it into place. Jinling had no motion, no momentum, and Xue Yang smiled.

“Got you,” the man sang softly, his head tilting to the side, and Jinling kicked and bucked and flailed, but Xue Yang didn't budge.

Without permission, a whimper broke from Jinling's lips, and Xue Yang's grin deepened.

Then, he closed his hand around Jinling's throat.

Crushingly tight.

In the span of a moment, the pain was overtaken by panic, and Jinling fought as best he could, writhing and bucking beneath Xue Yang's grip, but the man's hand was a vice that only grew stronger, and Jinling's arms were pinned down at his sides, and terror flooded every part of his body. His lungs began to burn, and Jinling tried to gasp for air, but Xue Yang's hand let none through, and it hurt, it *hurt*, and Jinling's legs scrambled uselessly, and he saw stars before his eyes –

Then Xue Yang's hand loosened, and Jinling sucked in a breath, his head spinning. Xue Yang grinned, malice dancing in his eyes, and then he tightened his grip again, leaning down to lay his left forearm over his hand. And then he pushed down, crushing Jinling's throat with twice the strength of before.

Slowly, terrifyingly, Jinling felt the strength begin to bleed out from his limbs. The useless, frantic scrambling of his legs grew slow, and clumsy, and his arms stopped straining against the sword and Xue Yang's knee. His lungs felt like they were in a vice within a forge, burning



and aching and fit to burst, and Xue Yang's leering face was growing fuzzy, and the world was growing dark.

"Look at me," Xue Yang breathed, too close to his face. "Look at me."

In the last act of defiance he had, Jinling squeezed his eyes shut. He heard Xue Yang snarl, and the pressure on his neck shifted – and then the sword that was biting into his arm twisted, tearing at his flesh and Jinling's eyes flew open wide, his scream stuck beneath Xue Yang's hand –

And then a blur of brown swept through the world, and there was a sickening crack.

Xue Yang's hand shifted, not quite enough to let Jinling breathe, but then the blur moved again, and once again there was a loud crack, and then another, and another, and Xue Yang let go, scrambling off of Jinling's chest.

Jinling gasped, but the air hurt and at first he choked, coughing and spluttering and shaking on the ground. It was several seconds before the breaths he took seemed to really fill his lungs, and he shuddered, trying to blink the haze from his eyes. The cracking sound was still happening, over and over, and he looked up.

Zizhen was standing above him, his face battered and bloody and *furious*. He was holding Suibian like a club, smashing it into Xue Yang's head with another crack. The man's eyes were unfocused and bloodshot, and as Jinling watched Zizhen struck him again, and Xue Yang slumped forward into the dirt. Motionless.

Drawing in a quick breath, Zizhen darted around him, crouching at Jinling's side. "Are you okay?" he asked, and Jinling grabbed his arm tightly.

"Zizhen, you – you," he rasped, but his voice hurt, and he winced.

"I'm okay," Zizhen said, but his voice was trembling, and his whole body was shaken, and he was covered in blood. Jinling could see the deep, bloody bite mark on his neck, and red marks on his face that would no doubt soon be bruises, and he was limping, too, favouring his right leg.

"Did you... fifteen fierce corpses... yourself?" Jinling asked, but fear flickered within him when Zizhen shook his head.

"Five or six are down for good, but I heard you – I saw-" He broke off, shuddering, and then said, "I cast a spirit net around the rest, but it won't hold long. We need to go."

Jinling nodded hazily, looking at the sword still pinning him to the dirt. Following his gaze, Zizhen winced.

"Is it... is it...?"

"It didn't go all the way through me, I don't think," Jinling said, taking a deep breath and pretending he wasn't shaking. "I think it just caught the side of my arm."

“Okay... Shall I try and move it?”

When Jinling nodded, Zizhen stood up, grabbing the hilt of Xue Yang’s sword. In one swift motion, he pulled it up and back, and Jinling couldn’t help but cry out. Fresh blood pooled down his arm, but he clamped his hand over the wound, and he took another shuddering breath, clenching his teeth.

“I’m sorry,” Zizhen said, crouching beside him again and putting a hesitant hand on Jinling’s good shoulder. “Keep pressure on it, okay? Can you sit up?”

Jinling nodded for a third time, and Zizhen helped him sit up. His head was spinning, and he had more wounds than he could count, and everything hurt, but he doubted Zizhen was feeling much better. Jinling shifted his legs underneath him, pushing himself up onto his feet. His hip screamed in protest, but he was able to stay upright.

“Do...” Zizhen hesitated, and then swallowed. His eyes were fixed on Xue Yang. “Do you think he’s dead?”

Jinling considered this for a moment, and then reached for his borrowed sword. It sprang into his hand, and he swung it down, cutting deep through Xue Yang’s neck.

“If he wasn’t then, he is now,” rasped Jinling, looking through the woods to where he could see the faint, golden glimmer of Zizhen’s spirit net. It didn’t look like it would hold much longer.

“There wasn’t time to do it properly,” Zizhen said, following his gaze, but Jinling shook his head slightly, looking at his friend.

“Thank you,” he said, and he meant it more than he had ever meant it before in his life. Tears stung at his eyes, and he lowered his head. “I’m sorry, Zizhen. I ... I thought you – I thought I’d got us both killed...”

“I agreed to come,” said Zizhen, his voice quiet and firm. He looped his arm through Jinling’s. “Come on, we need to move. If Xue Yang was fleeing then it’s probably not a bad idea to move towards the house.”

Together, they stumbled out of the woods and up towards the house, both leaning on the other. Jinling was starting to feel a little dizzy, and he kept coughing, while Zizhen was trembling violently, and swaying with every few steps.

They were a few feet away from the door when it opened, and Jinling’s heart leapt so high it took his breath away. The man who’d barged through the door froze, his eyes widening in a surprise that soon turned to horror, but Jinling had never been so happy to see him.

“*Jiujiu!*”

“What the *fuck?*” yelled Jiujiu, storming towards them, but that was his frightened yell, and he grabbed Jinling’s arm with a surprisingly gentle grip, taking Zizhen’s shoulder in the other.

“What the hell happened to you – why the hell are you here? You’re supposed to be at home!”

Behind him, others were coming through the door – Lan Qiren, supporting Lan Xichen, and then there was Nie Mingjue, with an unconscious man slumped over his shoulder, but before Jinling could see who that was *A-Die* came outside, alive and walking and in one piece, his hand encased in Mo Xuanyu’s, and then after him was Hanguang Jun and Wei Wuxian, who was carrying Sizhui, Sizhui who was awake, and *not dead*. Wen Qing was just a few paces behind, and they were all there, and relief flooded through Jinling so fiercely his knees gave out. He slumped forward into Jiang Cheng, who caught him with another curse, but it looked like Zizhen’s strength had gone too, because then Jiujiu was holding him up too.

“Fuck, fuck – Wen-guniang!”

*Oh, Jinling thought vaguely, relief making the world very fuzzy. Wen Qing is a doctor. Wonderful... she can help...*

But then Jinling remembered something, and he drew in a sharp breath, so sharp it made him cough again, and then he couldn’t stop coughing, and Jiujiu was yelling something and someone else was grabbing Jinling, but their hands caught one of his sword wounds and he flinched, coughing violently. The person shifted their grip, holding him upright gently, running a hand over his hair.

“A-Ling, it’s okay,” A-die murmured in his ear, but his voice was tight, worried, “A-Ling, breathe for me, please just breathe for me, A-Ling!”

“He was choking him,” Zizhen whimpered, “Xue Yang, he, he was strangling him –”

A-Die gave a sharp gasp of his own, holding Jinling a little closer as the coughing slowly subsided, and Jiujiu snapped, “Xue Yang?”

“Wei – Wei Wuxian,” Jinling rasped, before anyone else could say anything, “One of – of the fierce corpses, it – it bit Zizhen, he’s – he’s not going to turn into a fierce corpse too, is he?”

“Fuck,” said Jiujiu, his voice trembling slightly. He pulled at Zizhen’s collar slightly, staring at the ugly bite mark on his neck. “Fuck, it tried to take your throat out...”

“Let me see,” said Wen Qing, kneeling beside Jiujiu and Zizhen.

“Where are they now?” Wei Wuxian asked, his voice trembling slightly. “Xue Yang, the fierce corpses? Where are they?”

“Xue Yang is dead,” said Zizhen softly. “Some of the fierce corpses too. The others’re... still in the woods... we couldn’t, couldn’t take on all of them. Not on our own, not after...”

Light began to dance before Jinling’s eyes, and he closed them, letting himself lean further into his father’s arms. It was okay, now. A-Die was here. Jiujiu was here. Everyone was here, everyone was alive. They were going home. It was okay now.

“A-Ling?” A-Die said, but he sounded faraway and a little faint – and then he sounded frightened. “A-Ling!”

*It's okay, A-Die*, he thought distantly, as the world fell away into the dark of unconsciousness.  
*It's okay now.*

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading, please do let me know what you thought if you have the time and/or inclination! I love hearing from you! Until next time, please take care!

# Chapter 35

## Chapter Notes

Once again, a huge thank you to everyone who's reviewed, bookmarked, and left kudos - I'm thrilled at how many people are enjoying this story!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“A-Ling? *A-Ling!*”

Horror squeezed cold and tight around Zizhen’s chest as Jinling slumped into his father’s arms, his head tipping back, a trickle of blood trailing down his chin. Jiang Wanyin’s arms were still holding Zizhen upright, and they tightened around him as the man’s breath hitched in his throat.

If after everything – if they’d won only for Jinling to die here, to die now –

A keen left Zizhen’s throat, and it hurt – everything hurt, every single part of him ached and throbbed and stung, but his neck was the worst. It felt like the fierce corpse’s teeth were still inside him, still tugging at his throat, still about to rip it out entirely.

Wen Qing’s fingers were cool on his skin where she’d been studying the bite, but she turned away from him as Jin Zixuan cried out his son’s name, and she breathed in sharply.

“Jiang-zongzhu, put this on the bite wound, make sure it’s utterly covered,” she said, already moving away towards Jinling, and Jiang Wanyin flinched slightly. He took a deep breath, and then pushed Zizhen away slightly, unstopping a small bottle that Wen Qing must have given him.

“Hold still,” he murmured, his eyes flicking towards Jinling even as he pulled Zizhen’s collar down to reach the wound. Zizhen didn’t mind – his eyes were there too, watching as Wen Qing and Jin Zixuan laid Jinling down on the ground, as she took his pulse –

A sheer, burning pain shot through Zizhen’s neck and he gave a strangled cry, flinching despite his best efforts as Jiang Wanyin sucked in a sharp breath.

“I’m sorry,” he said, his voice low and strangely gently. “I’m sorry, Zizhen, but –”

“It stings horribly, and I’m very sorry for that, but it should stop the wound getting infected,” said Wen Qing tightly. “He’s lost a lot of blood – do you know where the worst of his injuries are?”

Her words were to Zizhen, and he knew it, but everything had happened so fast, and he swallowed. “I don’t – he – Xue Yang, he, he p-pinned him down, w-with his sword through –

through his arm. The right one.”

Jiang Wanyin made a sound like he had been punched, and Jin Zixuan whimpered. Zizhen cringed, unable to keep from watching as Wen Qing cut Jinling’s sleeve away, revealing a deep gash in the side of his arm. It could have been worse – the wound cut into the side of his arm, rather than going impaling it, but it was still a serious wound. Nausea curled in Zizhen’s stomach and he shuddered, Jiang Wanyin’s grip on him shifting.

“I need to cover the rest of the bite,” he said apologetically. “It’ll be easier if you hold still, if you can.”

Zizhen nodded slightly, but even that hurt so he just grit his teeth, clenching Suibian in his fist. Jiang Wanyin tipped up the little jar, pouring more of the powder onto the wound, and again it burnt like acid. This time, Zizhen was able to trap his cry behind his teeth.

“It’s okay, Zizhen, you’re doing really well,” said Wei Wuxian, and Zizhen glanced up at him. The man was smiling weakly, and in his arms Sizhui gazed down with a look of deep concern.

“Sizhui,” Zizhen breathed, feeling his lip tremble. “You’re – you’re-”

There were tears in Sizhui’s eyes, and he nodded slightly, offering Zizhen a weak smile even as he clung to the front of Wei Wuxian’s robes.

“Sizhui’s going to be fine,” Wei Wuxian insisted. “Though he’s going to have to learn to live like this, because I am never putting him down again. Too risky.”

Despite everything, Zizhen felt his lip curl towards a smile as Sizhui blushed slightly.

And then Jin Zixuan choked, and Zizhen looked back at Jinling, and his stomach flipped over itself.

The wound on his arm was bandaged, but Wen Qing had cut through Jinling’s robes again, this time at his side. She had peeled away the sodden fabric to reveal a wound on his hip as long as Zizhen’s hand, at least two inches deep, and it was still bleeding at an alarming pace. Zizhen could see muscle glistening.

He jerked away from Jiang Wanyin and threw up, his throat now also burning on the inside. He was trembling, and he felt himself falling forwards, but then Jiang Wanyin’s arms were around him again, holding him up.

“Fuck!” Jiang Wanyin said, pulling Zizhen’s hair back with a surprisingly gentle hand. “Uh, it’s – it’s okay, uh –”

“It’s alright,” Wei Wuxian said, but his voice was tight, and wavering. “It’s okay, you’re going to be okay!”

“Wei Ying,” said Hanguang Jun sharply, and for a moment Zizhen was terrified that it was because he thought Wei Wuxian was lying, because he thought Zizhen wasn’t going to be okay at all, but then Jiang Wanyin’s arms tightened around him again, and he said,

“Oh, fuck.”

Shakily, Zizhen looked up, back down towards the woods, and saw two fierce corpses emerging from the trees, running towards them.

“I’ll take care of this,” growled Nie Mingjue, dropping the man he was carrying onto the ground and striding forward, drawing Baxia. He’d barely taken two steps before he threw the blade, and Zizhen watched in awe as its trajectory curved, slicing through both corpses’ necks without so much as losing momentum. The blade returned to its sheath within a moment, and Nie Mingjue looked down at Zizhen. “Are there more in the woods?”

Zizhen nodded mutely, and Lan Qiren stepped forward. As he did, Zizhen saw Zewu Jun leaning on Hanguang Jun, and he swallowed. Neither of the Twin Jades looked very well, but Lan Xichen in particular looked on the verge of collapse.

“I will help you clear the woods,” said Lan Qiren. “It will not take long.” Nie Mingjue nodded, and together they strode down towards the woods.

Zizhen shuddered, and Jiang Wanyin rubbed his back gently.

“Are you good?” he asked warily. “Do you need to be sick again?”

Zizhen’s stomach churned, but he kept his mouth shut and shook his head slightly.

“Okay then,” Jiang Wanyin said, pulling Zizhen gently backwards into a more comfortable position. “You’re not bleeding anywhere else, are you?”

“I... I don’t know,” Zizhen admitted, looking down at himself. Everything hurt, and clothes were covered in blood, but he had no idea how much was his, and how much belonged to the corpses. He didn’t know how much belonged to Jinling.

“Okay,” said Jiang Wanyin again. “Well, where does it hurt the most?” He grimaced. “Other than your neck...”

That should be an easy question, should be something Zizhen could answer, but he didn’t know. *Everything* hurt, everywhere hurt, and he looked up hopelessly at Jiang Wanyin, whose face twisted into an expression that looked oddly wounded. Then, he looked up over his shoulder at Wei Wuxian, who swallowed, hugging Sizhui closer.

“It’s going to be okay,” he said again. “Jiang Cheng, his left leg, just above the knee.”

Jiang Wanyin nodded, and Zizhen looked down at his legs. His left leg *was* throbbing, just above his knee, but he couldn’t see much blood on his robes, only a slit all the way through the fabric and – *oh*. Jiang Wanyin pulled up his robes slightly, and revealed a large, dark stain on his dark trousers.

Vaguely, he remembered one of the fierce corpses landing a hit on his leg with a sword – he thought it was when Xue Yang’s hand went sailing past his head, somewhat distractingly. It was hard to recall with everything having happened so fast, but he thought it was the only time an actual weapon had struck him – not that that really mattered. They’d certainly landed

more than enough blows with fists, and at least one had managed to wind him with a tree branch.

Jiang Wanyin took a knife to the side of Zizhen's trousers, peeling them away to reveal an ugly gash in the side of his leg. It wasn't as bad as the one on Jinling's hip. It only looked an inch deep, and was much shorter, and though it was still bleeding it was more of an ooze than anything else. Jiang Wanyin did not look much reassured.

"Fuck," he muttered sympathetically.

"You need to clean it, Jiang Cheng," said Wei Wuxian worriedly. "Before you dress it, you need –"

"I know that!" Jiang Wanyin snapped.

Wen Qing glanced over her shoulder from where she was looking at Jinling, and then she met Zizhen's eyes with a sympathetic smile.

"I'll re-clean and re-dress everything at Lotus Pier, but the powder will suffice for now. The one you used for the bite. There are more bandages inside, but –"

"I have some here," Jiang Wanyin said, reaching into his Qiankun sleeve and pulling out a small bag, which looked to be some sort of first aid kit. He glanced at Zizhen, and then grimaced. "This will sting again. I'm sorry."

Clenching his teeth, Zizhen nodded, bracing himself. The powder did burn, and he flinched again, but he was able to keep his leg still, at least. As Jiang Wanyin began to bandage his leg, he met Zizhen's eyes.

"So, are you going to tell us what happened?"

Zizhen ducked his gaze, and took a deep breath. "We... we just wanted to help. We weren't going to do anything stupid – or, too stupid, anyway – we, we were waiting, just over in the trees. In case you needed back up, we... We just wanted to help. But Xue Yang – he came out, and saw us, and... There was a fight..."

"He summoned the fierce corpses?" asked Wei Wuxian, and Zizhen nodded, shivering.

"About fifteen of them," he said hollowly. "I think, I – it was hard to count. But he was fighting Jinling and I couldn't help because there were – there were so many and I couldn't draw Suibian so I had, so I did what I could, I – one of them got my neck and Jinling threw his sword, and – everything happened so quickly... But Jinling cut off Xue Yang's hand, the, the one he held the Yin Iron in, and –"

"Yin Iron?" asked Wei Wuxian, Jiang Wanyin, and Zewu Jun in unison, and Zizhen nodded.

"Where is it now?" demanded Jiang Wanyin.

"Jinling kicked it into the woods," said Zizhen, and Jiang Wanyin scowled, but Wei Wuxian spoke softly.



“Then what happened, Zizhen? When he’d kicked the Yin Iron away?”

“We kept fighting. I – we – I looked over and Xue Yang – he – he was sitting on Jinling’s chest and, and he’d stabbed the sword through his arm and – he was strangling him, so I hit him. Xue Yang. Until he let go. Jinling cut his throat.”

“Good,” said Hanguang Jun, his voice strangely cold. Zizhen glanced up, but Lan Wangji was looking at Sizhui.

“Okay,” Wen Qing sighed, sitting back, and Zizhen looked at her sharply – so sharply the bite wound on his neck tugged, and he bit back a cry. “He’s lost a lot of blood, but I think Jinling will be okay. He’s strong, and you got here in time.”

A sob of relief broke from Zizhen’s lips, joining a chorus of relived noises from the others, and Jiang Wanyin gave a hollow laugh, but then he stiffened, and said, “Wen-guniang?”

“I’m coming,” Wen Qing said, raising her eyebrow at Zizhen. “I’m getting rather tired of stitching you all up,” she said, and he ducked his eyes.

“I’m sorry, Wen-guniang.”

She tutted, and pulled up his chin, looking in his eyes for a moment before taking his pulse. “Don’t be sorry, just stop getting hurt.”

“I second that,” mumbled Wei Wuxian, and Hanguang Jun said, “Mn.”

Jiang Wanyin said nothing, and Zizhen had a feeling that he was still angry about his and Jinling’s leaving Lotus Pier, but he kept a hand on Zizhen’s back as Wen Qing assessed his wounds. And as she treated them. Apparently the weapons *had* struck him more than once – there was a shallow cut on his right arm, and a slightly deeper one on his side, though neither were as bad as the wound on his leg. There were also a series of scratches gouged into his chest and back from the claw-like nails of the fierce corpses, but the rest was mainly bruises. And, Wen Qing said, concussion, some bruised ribs, and potential internal bleeding, but she also smiled at him wearily, and squeezed his shoulder gently.

“You will be fine,” she promised, “but I don’t want you going to sleep anytime soon, alright?”

Zizhen nodded wearily, and out of the corner of his eye he saw Nie Mingjue and Lan Qiren striding out of the woods. Lan Qiren’s face was unreadable as ever, but when they drew nearer, Nie Mingjue raised his eyebrows at Zizhen.

“Who bashed that little psychopath’s skull in?” he asked, and Zizhen shifted uncomfortably. Jiang Wanyin’s hand rubbed his back again.

“I did,” Zizhen said uncertainly. “I couldn’t – I couldn’t draw Suibian so I just... just kept hitting him...”

“Well done,” said Nie Mingjue, nodding his head.

“Did you find the Yin Iron?” said Wei Wuxian, and Nie Mingjue and Lan Qiren looked at him in surprise.

“Yin Iron?” Nie Mingjue said, his brow furrowing. “The Yin Iron was all destroyed – assuming your seal was destroyed too.”

“Oh, it was, but there were five pieces,” said Wei Wuxian offhandedly. “That was in the long version of the story. It’s alright, I’ll grab it.” Wei Wuxian let out a low, long whistle, and the hair on the back of Zizhen’s neck stood up.

He shivered, and Jiang Wanyin pulled him gently into a hug. Surprised, Zizhen stiffened, but then he let himself slump against the man’s chest, and Jiang Wanyin held him a little tighter.

“We’re getting rid of this piece, too, Wei Wuxian,” he grumbled, and Zizhen glanced up to see the still-whistling Wei Wuxian roll his eyes.

“Obviously,” said Hanguang Jun, and then Wei Wuxian rolled his eyes again.

“Oh, now that is just – urgh,” said Jiang Wanyin, and Zizhen looked back towards the woods. His eyes widened. The Yin Iron was floating through the air towards them, turning on a cloud of black smoke – but Xue Yang’s hand was still wrapped around it.

It was horrific, but it was also, kind of, funny.

“Is that... is that a hand?” Sizhui asked weakly, and despite everything a small laugh broke from Zizhen’s lips.

“It is,” said Jiang Wanyin, sounding disgusted. “Get rid of it, Wei Wuxian!”

Still whistling, Wei Wuxian raised his eyebrows at his brother, nodding down at Sizhui in his arms, and then raising his eyebrows higher.

“Ew, no, gross!” yelled Jiang Wanyin. “I’m not touching it! Absolutely not.”

“Shufu,” said Hanguang Jun quietly, and Lan Qiren nodded, stepping forward and pulling a spirit-capture pouch over the Yin Iron, hand and all. Wei Wuxian stopped whistling and took a deep breath, shaking his head slightly.

“Right,” he said, a little breathlessly. “That’s that then. I think we should be getting home, don’t you, A-Cheng?”

“Yes,” said Jiang Wanyin grumpily. “Except this complicates things.”

“Jinling, Sizhui, Zizhen, Zewu Jun and Hanguang Jun are not in any state to fly alone, and Xuanyu is too little,” said Wen Qing firmly, earning a somewhat disgruntled look from Hanguang Jun, though he did not protest. “There is also Meng Yao to consider.”

For the first time, Zizhen glanced at the unmoving man Nie Mingjue had dropped to the ground when he went to deal with the fierce corpses. He’d assumed that Meng Yao was unconscious, but the man’s eyes were open, and they moved to whoever was speaking,

though they weren't exactly focused. It looked as though he was very drunk – or perhaps drugged, Zizhen supposed. Still, it made him think of the other Jin Guangyao, and he shivered.

“Is he dead?” he asked. “Jin Guangyao, I mean, is – is he dead?”

“Yes,” said Wei Wuxian. “Su She too.”

Relieved, Zizhen nodded.

“Well, if Wei Wuxian flies with Lan Sizhui -” Nie Mingjue began, but Jiang Wanyin shook his head.

“Nope, he’s done far too much demonic cultivation, his spiritual energy’s too low. If he falls off his sword mid-flight I’m not going down to catch him.”

Zizhen flinched slightly, remembering Wei Wuxian falling from the back of his sword the day before, but when he looked up Wei Wuxian was rolling his eyes, and he looked almost fond.

“Zixuan,” Jiang Cheng continued, “Can you take A-Ling and Xuanyu?”

Jin Zixuan nodded. He was very pale, his hand running over Jinling’s hair, but his voice was firm when he spoke, looking over his shoulder at Mo Xuanyu, who Zizhen had completely forgotten about. “You will have to hold on very tight, Didi. I need my hands to carry A-Ling. Is that alright?”

“I can hold on tight,” said Xuanyu, nodding.

“Great,” said Jiang Wanyin, glancing down at Zizhen. “So...”

“I can take Wei Zizhen, if Suibian will permit me to wield it,” said Wen Qing, smiling wearily. “It’s been a while since I’ve flown but I’m sure I remember how.”

“Suibian will let you,” Wei Wuxian promised.

“Okay,” said Jiang Wanyin, sounding relieved. “So, Wei Wuxian and Lan Sizhui will fly with me, then Lan Qiren can take Lan Wangji and Nie Mingjue can take Zewu Jun... As for Meng Yao... can we just tie him to the back of a sword and see what happens?”

Wei Wuxian snorted, but Lan Xichen flinched, and Nie Mingjue sighed.

“I can take Xichen and Meng Yao,” he said, though he did not sound happy about it.

“Great,” said Jiang Wanyin, and Zizhen felt hope burn through him as the man added, “let’s go home.”

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*It wasn't until Su She wrenched his sword out of Sizhui's stomach that Jingyi really understood what he was seeing. Then he saw the blood, and he heard Sizhui choke, and the*

*world around him was smothered in splintering ice. His own scream sounded so far away, and the pain in his ankle was suddenly faraway, and unimportant – because Sizhui –*

*Sizhui –*

*“Baba?” Sizhui breathed, a question, a plea, and Jingyi could see the fear in his shidi’s eyes, and then Sizhui swayed, and slumped backwards, and Jingyi’s terror burst out of him in a shriek.*

*“Sizhui! Sizhui, Sizhui!”*

*He threw himself forward, but Xue Yang’s hand was twisted tight in his hair, and he could only watch as Hanguang Jun was pulling Sizhui into his lap, putting pressure on the wound. Sizhui was jerking and whimpering, Sizhui was dying, and all Jingyi could do was scream.*

*Hanguang Jun’s head was bowed low, and he was murmuring words Jingyi couldn’t hear, words that didn’t matter, because they couldn’t help Sizhui, they couldn’t save Sizhui, he needed medicine and he needed energy and Hanguang Jun had neither.*

*And Jingyi was just as useless, just as helpless, and he wailed as Su She swept down towards Sizhui, and Hanguang Jun leapt at him like a wild animal –*

*And Xue Yang’s knife dug painfully into Jingyi’s neck, but Hanguang Jun didn’t notice, and Jingyi didn’t blame him because really, the pain was nothing when Sizhui was lying there alone, when Sizhui was trembling and bleeding –*

*And then Hanguang Jun was on the ground, was motionless, and Su She crouched over Sizhui, and Sizhui cried out, jerking away from the man who had stabbed him.*

*“Leave him alone!” Jingyi wailed, his anger drowned by sobs he couldn’t control. “Leave him alone, leave him alone! Sizhui!”*

*Behind him, Xue Yang laughed. “Do it!”*

*Su She met Jingyi’s eyes, and then drove a knife into Sizhui’s heart.*

*“Jingyi! Jingyi! Wake up!”*

*With a shuddering gasp, Jingyi opened his eyes, looking wildly around him. He was in a room – Wei Wuxian’s room – and Jiang Yanli was sitting on the bed, leaning over him with her hands on his shoulders. When he met her eyes, she gave a weak smile, putting a hand on his cheek.*

*“It’s alright,” she said softly, “it’s alright now, Jingyi. Can you a deep breath for me?”*

*Shakily, he obeyed, but only so he could rasp out, “Sizhui?”*

*Jiang Yanli’s lips pursed ever so slightly, her eyes filling with tears.*

*No, no, no –*

Sizhui was alive, he'd been alive when Su She carried him away – unless that was the dream, and the memory was – the reality was –

"I don't know where Sizhui is," Jiang Yanli said softly, squeezing his shoulder. "Take another deep breath for me, just breathe for a moment. Please?"

Tears stung Jingyi's eyes and he closed them quickly, drawing in as deep a breath as he could manage. His mind tumbled back through what had happened and he tried to put the pieces together, to remember whether –

To remember if –

*"Jin Guangyao wants Sizhui alive for now, but only for a day or two. Then, he's all mine, and I can take all the time I want. Don't worry, little Lan – I'll be sure to send you his mangled corpse."*

He shuddered at the memory, at Xue Yang's words, and the whisper of his breath so close to Jingyi's cheek, the feeling of his fingers stroking at Jingyi's neck. That had happened, he was sure that had happened, which meant that –

"How long?" he begged, his eyes flying open to find Jiang Yanli. "How – when – I?"

"You were attacked yesterday," said Jiang Yanli, a sad smile on her face. "It's midmorning. You've slept through the night, but that's all."

One night – one night – so it hadn't been a day yet. Sizhui could still be alive.

"Earlier this morning," Jiang Yanli continued gently, "A-Xian received a message from Wen Qing, with a location. They left at dawn, or thereabouts, to try and find them."

Relief and fear rose together in Jingyi's heart, twisting around each other painfully, and he swallowed. If they really did know where Sizhui and the others were, if they had a chance to save them, that was great, but – but –

*"You tell them that if they don't back off and stop looking, I'll slaughter everyone we've taken. Oh so slowly, too. If they do back off, and stop looking, you can have most of them back. We'll drop them off at Lotus Pier in a week or so. Though, if you like, don't tell them – let them come. That's what I want."*

Xue Yang's words were poison in his heart, an unscratchable itch at the back of his mind, and all he could think of was, "What if it's a trap?"

"I didn't speak to A-Xian for very long," Yanli conceded. "But he said there was something in the letter that made him think it wasn't."

Jingyi pursed his lips. Even if it wasn't a trap, if they got caught and Jin Guangyao used that as an excuse...

"I believe," Jiang Yanli sighed, "that Jinling and Zizhen have gone after them. A-Cheng told them to stay here, but it did not stop them. That note is to you, from them." She nodded

towards the bedpost, and Jingyi saw a piece of talisman paper sticking to it. His name was written across the top, and he started to raise his arm towards it, but it hurt and he winced, so Jiang Yanli took it instead, holding it up so he could read it.

*Jingyi – I'm sorry we won't be here when you wake up. Hopefully, we'll be back soon. Wei Wuxian knows where Sizhui is, so we're going to follow. If there's anything we can do to bring Sizhui home we'll do it, I promise, but we'll be careful! See you soon, Zizhen (and Jinling)*

He swallowed, a sense of horrible uselessness coiling in his gut. He glanced at Jiang Yanli.

“Didn’t you... didn’t you try to stop them?”

She gave a sad, weary smile. “They were gone before I knew they were leaving. And when they had...”

Jingyi glanced down, doing his best not to cry. He didn’t manage it very well – his tears slipped down onto his cheeks faster than he could hope to wipe them away with his aching limbs, but Jiang Yanli brushed them away with a handkerchief, and then squeezed his hand again.

“I can imagine a little of what you’re feeling,” she murmured gently, and he glanced at her. “I know that you’ve gone through so much that I could never understand, but I *also* know how it feels to worry for little brothers, without being able to protect them. My body is weak, and I can’t support a strong core. It means I’ve had to watch A-Xian and A-Cheng run into battle, knowing full well I cannot protect them, that I can’t watch their backs. It is hard, sometimes, not to feel that my body has let me down.” She paused, and then glanced down. “I don’t know whether or not you know of this, but during the war A-Xian was missing for three months. The Wen had thrown him into the Burial Mounds, but all we knew was that he was gone – that he had made plans to meet with A-Cheng, but he’d never arrived. For three months, I didn’t know if he was alive or dead, I didn’t know – So I, I know how it feels when the grief and the fear is too big to carry.” She broke off, and Jingyi sniffed, feeling his tears trail down the sides of his face into his hair.

There were tears in Jiang Yanli’s eyes, too, and she stroked Jingyi’s hair back.

“That,” he sniffed, and then he took a deep breath, “that’s more... more than a little like...”

Jiang Yanli nodded sadly, as though his words made all the sense in the world. “It is too big for words,” she said, and Jingyi understood, and he pursed his lips to keep from sobbing. Jiang Yanli smiled sadly, running a hand over his hair. “It is not too big for tears,” she murmured. “No one will disturb us here. We are alone, save for Rulan, and I promise he will not tell.”

She nodded towards a small crib nearby, and Jingyi let out a strangled laugh. And then a sob. And another, and another, until he was crying so hard he thought his ribs might break apart. Jiang Yanli held his hands and stroked his hair, humming softly now and then as he bawled, but she never once tried to quiet him, not even when Rulan began to fuss. Instead, she simply

rose and picked her baby up, settling him in one arm before returning to stroking Jingyi's hair with the other.

Jingyi cried until his chest was empty and his throat was raw, and then Jiang Yanli stood up, putting Rulan back in his crib and then disappearing for a moment behind the screen that separated Jingyi and Sizhui's beds from the rest of the room. When she returned, she was holding a tray that she set down on a small table, and from it she took a small cloth and cleaned his face. It had been years since anyone did such a thing for Jingyi, but somehow it didn't feel like she was babying him, and the cloth was warm and felt nice, and he was too tired to really care.

"I've made some soup," she said softly, "if you would like to eat something?"

The crying must have loosened the knots that fear had tied in his stomach, because to Jingyi's surprise he found that he was hungry, and he nodded. Jiang Yanli helped him sit up, passing him a bowl of soup.

"I know that the Lan prefer vegetarian cuisine," she said, "so the recipe is a little changed, but it's a favourite of A-Xian's."

For his part, Jingyi was perfectly content to eat meat outside of Cloud Recess, but saying that would be very rude, and he was actually a little touched by the thoughtfulness, so he thanked her, and ate. The soup was delicious – he could see why it was a favourite of Wei Wuxian's. Though her saying that had made him fear it would be spicy enough to burn his tongue off, there was very little heat to it.

He had just about finished eating when there was a soft knock at the door. Jiang Yanli stood up and moved gracefully around the screen to open the door.

"Wen-gongzi," she said, and Jingyi heard Wen Ning reply.

"Jin-furen, I – I know this isn't a good time and I'm not sure it's a good idea, so if it isn't we can leave, but A-Yuan heard that Lan Jingyi-gongzi is injured and he wants to visit."

Something inside of Jingyi shifted, a feeling that could have been either comfort or pain, and his breath caught in his throat. A-Yuan. Baby Sizhui. *Not* Sizhui.

"I'm not sure," said Jiang Yanli, so quietly that Jingyi could barely hear her. "He – well, I will ask him, but..."

"I understand," said Wen Ning earnestly, but then Jingyi heard a smaller voice pipe up.

"A-Yuan will be very good and very gentle!"

Tears filled Jingyi's eyes, and he turned his face away from the screen. Of course, A-Yuan would be good and gentle. Sizhui was always good and gentle.

"I'm sure you will, A-Yuan," said Jiang Yanli warmly. "But he might be a bit too tired for visitors right now. I will ask him."

Jingyi sniffed, glancing back towards the door as Yanli walked around the screen. As soon as she saw him, Jiang Yanli's face fell into a look of sympathy. "Did you hear?"

Jingyi nodded, unsure of what to say.

"I know it could be difficult to see him right now," she said, coming to kneel beside the bed and lowering her voice. "A-Xian could not bring himself to see A-Yuan last night. It is entirely up to you."

Taking a deep breath, Jingyi twisted his hands in the blankets. "He can, he can come in if he likes."

"Okay," said Jiang Yanli. "If it gets too much, tell me that you would like a nap and we will take him away, alright?"

Jingyi nodded, and Jiang Yanli disappeared behind the screen again. A few moments later, she reappeared, A-Yuan tiptoeing at her side. He continued to tiptoe all the way to the bed, and when he got there he reached out and patted Jingyi's hand very gently.

"Yi-gege," he said, his little voice very serious. It would have made Jingyi laugh, if his concerned expression did not look so much like Sizhui. "Ning-gege says you're hurt. A-Yuan's come to help make you feel better!"

He should say something. Jingyi knew he should say something, but he couldn't – his voice was stuck in his throat, and as he looked at A-Yuan all he could think of was Sizhui. In his earliest, fuzziest memories, Sizhui looked like this. Jingyi had no memories *before* Sizhui. He didn't remember meeting him, or any dramatic first encounter. Sizhui had just always been there, for as long as he could remember, and now he was gone.

And if he stayed gone, if he *died*, Jingyi would have to watch A-Yuan grow up into a person that wasn't Sizhui, but wore Sizhui's face and his body, and –

"Oh no," A-Yuan gasped, clambering up onto the bed. Jiang Yanli moved forward quickly, her arms reaching out to take A-Yuan away, but before she could his little hands reached out to Jingyi's face, wiping away the fresh tears spilling from his eyes. "Oh no, Yi-gege, don't cry! Don't cry, it's okay! A-Yuan will make it better, okay? Shh now, it's okay."

"I don't think," Yanli began, but Jingyi shook his head slightly, and she fell back. A-Yuan wiggled around until he was sitting comfortably beside Jingyi, patting his hair with none of Yanli's grace.

"There, there," he murmured. "It's okay, shh now. It's okay, Yi-gege. It's okay. You're being very brave."

Jingyi took a deep, shuddering breath, and A-Yuan made a little humming noise.

"Well done, Yi-gege," he said sombrely. "Everything is big and scary now, but Yi-gege is doing very well. It's not gonna be big and scary forever. A-Die promised."



At that, Jingyi had to choke back another sob, but when Yanli raised her eyebrows he shook his head again. It hurt, seeing A-Yuan sitting there so tiny and little and not Sizhui, but somehow, it also helped. A-Yuan dug into his robes and pulled out a small, blue rabbit that Jingyi recognised at once, and even as he wanted to bawl, he smiled.

“This is Luobo,” said A-Yuan, “Zhui-gege has one like him called Tuzi. Do you have one Yi-gege?” Jingyi shook his head, and A-Yuan twirled a finger through his own hair thoughtfully. “Zhui-gege says they’re just for Rich-gege’s favourites. If I say you’re *my* favourite then maybe Rich-gege will find one for you, too?”

Jingyi swallowed, and then shook his head slightly. “You and – you and Sizhui are special,” he whispered. “They’re for you. I don’t need one.”

A-Yuan frowned, looking very much like he could not fathom anyone on earth not needing a blue silk rabbit. Then, he nodded, and patted Jingyi’s hair again. “Okay, Yi-gege. Luobo and I will tell you a story then.”

Jingyi managed a nod, and A-Yuan immediately began chattering about radishes that were planted and then turned into little boys and girls who went on an adventure with the magical blue man to find some nice soup, and Jingyi’s heart swung like a pendulum between hurt and comfort with every sentence or two. Sometimes, A-Yuan made the rabbit hop gently over Jingyi’s arms, but Yanli stepped in before he got too enthusiastic, reminded him that Jingyi was still very hurt. Then, A-Yuan would become so gentle it almost tickled, and Jingyi couldn’t help but smile just a little.

Then, he saw the glittering gold of a spiritual messenger butterfly, and his heart froze. Jiang Yanli held out her hand and closed her eyes – and then she staggered backwards, grabbing the wall for support.

*No, no, no, no, no, no –*

Terror surged through Jingyi, and Jiang Yanli opened her eyes and they were full of tears – but she was smiling. She was smiling, and then she was hurrying over to the side of the bed and kneeling beside him, and then she took his hand and pinched A-Yuan’s cheeks.

“It’s okay,” she said, her voice a little strangled. “They’re coming home. Everyone’s coming home.”

Jingyi couldn’t hold back his sob. “Everyone?”

“Everyone,” Jiang Yanli promised. “They found A-Ling and Zizhen – they’re both injured, and Sizhui, Hanguang Jun and Zewu Jun also have some significant injuries but they’re all okay – they’re all stable, and safe, and they’re coming home. Jin Guangyao and Su She are gone. Gone, gone. They’re coming home, Jingyi. They’re all coming home.”

“A-Die’s coming home?” A-Yuan asked excitedly, and Jiang Yanli nodded, nuzzling his nose.

“Yes, A-Yuan. A-Die’s finally coming home,” she breathed, and A-Yuan beamed, but then he gasped, his little brow furrowing.

“Oh *no*, ” he said, reaching up and wiping at the tears on Yanli’s cheeks. Then he glanced down at Jingyi, who had made no effort to stop the tears of joy and relief falling down his face, and A-Yuan’s eyes widened further. “Oh no oh no!” Somewhat frantically, he reached out, batting at the tears on Jingyi’s cheeks with one little hand and Yanli’s with the other. “A-Die’s coming home, it’s good! No need, no need to *cry*! Gege, Gugu, no need to cry!”

The little boy looked genuinely distressed, and Jingyi knew he should comfort him, but when he met Jiang Yanli’s eye, Jingyi couldn’t help it. The laughter burst out of him, accompanied by fresh tears that brought another round of ‘Oh no!’s out of A-Yuan, which in turn made Jingyi and Jiang Yanli both laugh harder, until Jingyi’s ribs began to ache.

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! I love hearing from you, so please do leave a review if you have the mind to. Until next time, stay safe and take care.

# Chapter 36

## Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for all your lovely comments! Your support means the world to me and I can't thank you enough. I hope you enjoy this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

By the time they touched down at Lotus Pier, Lan Wangji was utterly exhausted. They had flown swiftly, though not so fast as to disallow conversation, so Xiongzhong could be filled in on most of what Sizhui and the others had revealed of the future, and what happened in the week they had been here. For a while, it was something to focus on, but the flight took several hours, and so towards its end the conversation petered away, leaving Wangji with nothing to distract from the gnawing pain in his gut.

Wen Qing had said it would hurt for a while.

“It’s the incision in your core itself that will take a few days to heal,” she’d said as she applied a dressing to the open wound on his abdomen, before they even left that awful room. “A golden core will always fight the surgery, even for the most willing donor, so in order to cut it away you have to... Anyway - it will take a few days to heal. But it *will* heal. In the meantime, try not to use any spiritual energy.”

Wangji was grateful for her certainty. Without it, he suspected it would significantly more difficult to remain calm. It felt like her knife was still digging into him, like her hands were still inside him, tugging his core away, excruciatingly slow. It was a mere echo of the agony of the moment, but a loud one – pain so sharp that without her assurance it would heal, he might doubt such a thing to be possible.

Still, Wangji made sure to keep the pain from his face. Jiang Wanyin was flying close, and both Wei Ying and Sizhui had glanced at him often during the flight. Xiongzhong, too. It would help none of them to see his pain.

There was a crowd in the courtyard as they arrived, but to Wangji’s relief it was small – very small, compared to the welcome party that had surged out to meet Wei Ying several days ago. Jiang Yanli and Nie Huaisang were at its centre, along with a woman Lan Wangji recognised as Mo Xuanyu’s mother, Mo Nianzhen. Her hands were trembling, clasped against her mouth, and Wangji felt an urge of sympathy, his eyes moving to Sizhui. Wen Ning was also there, as was Jiang Jianyu, accompanied by several other Jiang disciples.

Jin Zixuan was the first to land, Jinling still cradled in his arms – thankfully no longer unconscious. Without a second’s hesitation, Jiang Yanli rushed forward, her face pale as she

snatched Jinling's hand. Mo Xuanyu peeked out from behind Zixuan, and Mo Nianzhen let out a short wail.

"Xuanyu!"

Quick as an arrow from a bow, Xuanyu shot forward, colliding with his mother with a strangled cry of, "A-Niang!" Just a moment later, Shufu landed, and Wangji's feet hit the ground. Wangji was torn between turning left or right, unsure as to whether he should look for Wei Ying or Xiongzhong. He wasn't sure who needed him more, who *he* needed more, and a strange feeling filled his chest. Overwhelmed – he felt *overwhelmed*, and he –

"Lan Zhan," Wei Ying murmured, somehow already by his side, leaning his shoulder into Wangji's. When he met his eyes it felt as though Wei Ying was staring into his soul, and immediately it was easier to breathe. Wei Ying gave a small, weary smile. "You look exhausted..." Wei Ying paused, looking sadly down at Sizhui. "Both of you."

"Mn..."

"Wen Qing," Wei Ying said, "Sizhui, Lan Zhan – can I take them to get some rest?"

Wangji blinked. Surely there were other things that needed doing, and Xiongzhong needed him – Xiongzhong –

"Yes," said Wen Qing, "I think that would be a very good idea. Though they should both eat something before they sleep."

"There's a pot of soup waiting in your rooms, A-Xian," said Jiang Yanli, suddenly there. She tucked Wei Ying's hair behind his ear with a small smile. "Also, A-Yuan got very excited when he found out that you were on your way, so he's running off that energy with the youngest disciples. When you're ready, let me know."

"Thank you, Shijie," Wei Ying said reverently, gifting Jiang Yanli a smile that was only ever hers, and Wangji turned, looking for his own brother.

He found him already at his side, and his heart twisted. Xichen looked haggard, a word Wangji had never imagined describing his brother with before. There were dark circles under his eyes, and his face was slack with exhaustion, and he held himself as though every one of his limbs was heavier than stone. However, when he met Wangji's eyes he smiled, softly, gently – the smile that meant whatever his next words would be, they would be a heart-felt truth.

"Get some rest, Wangji," he said softly, flicking his eyes meaningfully towards Shufu and Nie Mingjue, before looking back at Wangji. "I will be fine." He paused for a moment, looking intently into Wangji's eyes, and then his smile grew softer, and sadder, and he took a small step closer, squeezing Wangji's hand. "I'm not going anywhere, Wangji, I promise."

The words nearly broke him, and Wangji had to fight to stop his breath from catching in his throat. He hadn't realised how much he needed to hear those words until Xiongzhong said

them, and the relief that they brought was dizzying. Wangji nodded, and Wei Ying pressed into his shoulder again.

“Come on, Lan Zhan,” he said gently, smiling at Xichen. “We’ll see you soon, Zewu Jun – but not too soon. You look like you could do with sleep, too.”

Xichen smiled faintly, and Wen Qing called over from where she was studying the wound on Zizhen’s neck again. “He certainly could, but I’d like to have another look at him first. These two little fools too – their wounds will need re-cleaning and re-dressing.”

Despite himself, Wangji felt a flicker of fear at that. If Wen Qing wanted to see Xiongzhang again, if there was something wrong –

“I will be fine, Wangji,” Xichen murmured again, squeezing his hand. “If am not, I will find you immediately. I promise.”

Wangji nodded again and let Wei Ying lead him away through Lotus Pier, Sizhui still cradled carefully in his arms. He had to be getting heavy – Wei Ying had been carrying him for hours now, but Wangji couldn’t take their son without further injuring himself, and they were almost there, now. Almost there.

The door was closed when they reached Wei Ying’s rooms, so Wangji stepped forward to open it. Wei Ying thanked him with a smile, and stepped inside –

“*Sizhui!*” Jingyi’s voice cried from inside, bursting with desperation and relief at a very un-Lan-like volume, and Wangji’s mouth twitched towards a smile as he followed Wei Ying inside.

“Jingyi!” Sizhui was quieter, but there was no less emotion in his voice. The screen that separated Jingyi and Sizhui’s beds from the rest of the room had been pushed back, and Wangji was pleased to see that Jingyi was sitting up – even if he was propped up against several pillows. He was pale and bruised, but he was upright, and his eyes were sharp. There were tears on his cheeks, and a huge smile on his face, and Wangji felt a lump rise in his throat.

Wei Ying did not put Sizhui down on his own bed, instead lowering him down next to Jingyi. The two boys clung to each other, Jingyi burying his head in Sizhui shoulder, Sizhui hiding his face in Jingyi’s hair. Physically, the embrace was a little awkward – Sizhui could neither roll over nor sit up, and Jingyi was still injured, too, but neither boy seemed to care. They were trembling, both of them, and murmuring desperate words that Wangji didn’t think were his to hear.

After smoothing Sizhui’s hair back, Wei Ying stood up, glancing at Wangji. His expression softened, and he walked quickly to his side, taking his hand.

“You look so lost,” he teased quietly, pulling him gently towards Sizhui’s bed. A little louder, he said, “Here, sit down. I’ll get you some soup, okay? Get some food into you.”

Wangji nodded dumbly, and Jingyi looked up, letting go of Sizhui for a second to point to a small table.

“The soup’s over there,” he said, his voice thick with tears. “It’s vegetarian, and really good.”

Warmth touched Wangji’s heart as Wei Ying crossed quickly over to the table, taking the lid off the pot suspiciously. Steam curled into the air, bringing with it a pleasant smell that managed to stir Wangji’s hunger, though Wei Ying gave a short cry of dismay.

“I can’t believe Shijie made *my* soup *without ribs*,” he mourned, shaking his head and reaching down to fill a bowl. “Jingyi, do you want some?”

“I’ve already eaten, but thank you,” said Jingyi. He was shuffling down the pillows slightly, so he was no longer sitting above Sizhui. Their hands were entwined, clinging tight, and Jingyi hesitated. “What... what happened?”

Sizhui flinched, closing his eyes, and pain flared hot in Wangji’s core.

“Later,” Wei Ying said. “We’ll tell you everything, Jingyi, I promise, but not now. They need rest.”

“Okay,” Jingyi whispered, his voice oddly hollow. “I’m sorry.”

“Please don’t be,” said Sizhui, and Jingyi shivered.

“Here,” said Wei Ying, startling Wangji’s attention away. He was holding out a bowl of soup and a spoon, and Wangji took them with a nod. Wei Ying smiled, and then returned to the pot, dishing up another bowl. “We’ll have to be smart about this, Sizhui, Wen Qing doesn’t want you sitting up yet. Will you hold this for a moment for me, Jingyi?”

Jingyi nodded, taking the bowl and the spoon as Wei Ying sat at the edge of Sizhui’s bed, a sad smile on his face as he carefully eased Sizhui’s head up, resting it in his lap.

“Is that okay?” he asked worriedly, stroking Sizhui’s hair back. “Does it hurt?”

“No,” Sizhui promised, and Wei Ying’s smile grew a little stronger.

“Good,” he said, taking the bowl from Jingyi again. “Because I’m not having you drown in soup any time soon. It would be extremely undignified.” He paused, his face and voice becoming serious even as mischief danced in his eyes. “Speaking of, I’m going to feed you now, and if you decide that that’s embarrassing, I will just remind you about the great job you did with those silencing talismans, and you will have to accept this as my revenge. Understood?”

Wangji frowned slightly, but Sizhui just smiled.

“I’m too tired to be embarrassed,” he admitted, and Wei Ying’s mask of strictness fell away.

“You can sleep soon,” he said gently, feeding Sizhui a spoonful of soup.

Sizhui smiled. "It's good."

"Of course it's good, Shijie made it," said Wei Ying proudly. "I can tell. Lan Zhan, be a good boy and eat your soup."

Wangji sent Wei Ying a half-hearted glare, but he also did as he was told, raising the spoon to his lips. Sizhui was right – it was good. A comfortable quiet filled the room, kept from silence by Wei Ying's absent-minded humming. If Wangji was correct, it was an improvised melody, but every now and then he heard elements of Wangxian, and warmth flooded him from head to toe.

When Sizhui's bowl was empty, Wei Ying continued to hum, running a hand over Sizhui's hair. Wangji watched, forgetting the now-empty bowl in his own hands, the spoon still held in his fingers. Sizhui's eyelids were beginning to droop, and Wei Ying's humming grew softer, and gentler. And more familiar. A lump grew in Wangji's throat as Wei Ying lulled their son to sleep with Wangxian, as Jingyi, too, let his eyes close, his head ducked down to press against Sizhui's shoulder.

It wasn't until Jingyi and Sizhui were breathing slowly and deeply enough to be truly asleep that Wei Ying ducked down, kissing Sizhui's forehead, before ever so carefully shifting his head off of his lap and onto a pillow. Wei Ying smoothed back Jingyi's hair, and then looked at Wangji, smiling sadly.

"Ah, Lan Zhan," he murmured, standing up and easing the bowl and the spoon from Wangji's fingers to put them on the floor. "You should get some rest, too."

Wangji stared at the bowl on the floor. "That does not live there."

Wei Ying rolled his eyes. "I'm sure it will survive."

Automatically, Wangji leant down to pick up the bowl, but the movement sent a spasm of pain through him, escaping his teeth in a hiss. Wei Ying's eyes widened, and he lurched forward, grabbing Wangji's shoulder.

"Lan Zhan!" Wei Ying's voice was quiet, but tight with fear, and he pushed Wangji gently upright. "Are you okay? I'll get the bowl, I'll put it away, okay, just – just sit tight for a moment, okay?"

Unable to do anything else, Wangji nodded, trying to steady his breathing as Wei Ying rushed to put the bowl and spoon away on the tray with the pot of leftover soup. He was back at Wangji's side within a second, his hand cupping Wangji's cheek.

"Let's get you over to my bed," he said, his eyes full of worry. "That way if we're whispering we won't wake up those two."

Once again, Wangji nodded, letting Wei Ying lead him across the room. Now reawakened, the pain was radiating through him in waves that made his hands tremble and clench at his sides, but Wei Ying's arm was firm around his back, steering him to the bed.

“Lie down,” Wei Ying commanded when they got there. “I promise, Lan Zhan, it will hurt less if you lie down.”

Wangji obeyed, but Wei Ying was still standing, and a lump rose in his throat. He raised his hand, and at once Wei Ying took it, sitting on the edge of the bed and pressing Wangji’s hand to his lips. Slowly, the pain began to ease a little, enough that he no longer had to regulate his breathing, enough that he could pay attention again.

Wangji took a deep breath, and then he stiffened. “Wei Ying – you did not eat.”

“I’m okay,” said Wei Ying at once, but Wangji frowned, and a sheepish smile tugged at his lips. “Ah, but what would I be if I didn’t look after my Lans first?”

“You have taken care of us. You should eat.”

“It’s really not the same without the ribs-”

“Wei Ying.”

“Okay, okay!” Wei Ying laughed softly. “Okay. I’ll be right back.”

Wangji watched Wei Ying hurry back to the pot of soup, letting himself stare, letting himself breathe in the sight of him. Wei Ying was a little careless as he rushed to fill the bowl, and soup splashed on his hands, but he hardly seemed to notice, darting quickly back across the room to perch on the edge of the bed. As soon as he started to eat, it was clear that he realised how much he needed to – his eyes widened slightly, and he leant forward, finishing the entire bowl in a matter of minutes, without a single word. Then he went to put the bowl on the floor, only to meet Wangji’s narrowing eyes and get up to put it on the tray instead.

He came back to sit on the bed again, but his eyes flickered down to Wangji’s abdomen, and his smile fell away. There was pain in his eyes, burning behind tears, and he swallowed. “Lan Zhan...” The anguish in his voice was echoed by understanding, and a sudden, horrible thought struck Wangji’s mind.

“How long?” he breathed.

Confusion deepened Wei Ying’s frown, and he shook his head slightly. “What? What do you mean? How long what?”

“When you gave Jiang Wanyin your core. How long did it take?”

Wei Ying winced, looking away, and Wangji’s heart sank. “Ah, Lan Zhan... it doesn’t matter now. That’s long gone, long done –”

“Wei Ying. How long?”

With a sigh, Wei Ying hung his head. “Two days. That she was cutting into me, anyway. It took two days.”

Two days.



*Days.*

Wangji did not know if he could have endured that agony for two hours, let alone *days* – he would have tried, for Sizhui of course he would have tried, but – but –

“Days?” his whisper broke, and Wei Ying looked down at him as though his heart was breaking.

“I’m fine, Lan Zhan,” he said, wiping tears from Wangji’s cheeks. “I really – I promise.”

But even if he was fine now (which Wangji doubted) he had not been before – Wei Ying had endured *this*, had suffered through the heightened anguish of the blade cutting through his core for *two days*, and he – he must have been thrown into the Burial Mounds straight afterwards, which meant that his was thrown into the Burial Mounds feeling like this, but worse – this but empty, his core would have been gone and it would hurt the way this hurt and –

“Lan Zhan! Lan Zhan, hey, look at me, look at me, please!” Desperation changed Wei Ying’s whispers to whimpers, and a soft gasp left Wangji’s lips as he obeyed, seeking out Wei Ying’s face. He looked afraid, and his hand rested on Wangji’s cheek again. “Breathe for me, Lan Zhan, please.”

Wangji took a deep breath. For Wei Ying, he could breathe.

“That’s it,” Wei Ying whispered, drying Wangji’s tears with his thumb. “It’s okay, Lan Zhan. It’s okay.” He paused. “Do you want me to go and find Wen Qing, to see if she can give you something to –”

“No,” Wangji said, fear pushing his voice from his throat before Wei Ying had finished speaking.

“If you’re in pain –”

Panic, irrational and sharper than a blade rose strong in his chest. “Don’t leave. Please.”

“Oh, Lan Zhan...” Wei Ying’s voice broke, and he tried to smile, but there were tears in his eyes. “I’ll stay. I won’t go anywhere, okay? I’ll stay right here.”

“Thank you,” whispered Wangji, and Wei Ying shook his head.

“No, Lan Zhan, you – you don’t need to thank me for anything. I – I’m just so glad you’re okay. I’m so glad you’re okay.”

Wangji swallowed. “Lie with me?” Wei Ying raised his eyebrows as if ready to joke, but Wangji’s throat tightened and he felt his eyes sting with tears, and Wei Ying’s face crumpled again. “I need – I want to see you.”

Tears clung to Wei Ying’s eyelashes as he tried to smile, but then he gave a nod, lying down carefully on his side next to Wangji. Leaning forward, he kissed Wangji’s forehead, and then his cheeks and then his nose, feather-light and gentle, and then he pulled back just far enough

that Wangji could see his face. “Better?” he murmured, and Wangji nodded, a lump rising in his throat.

“Mn.” It was all Wangji could manage to say, and even then it was difficult.

There was so much that he wanted to say – *so* much. Trapped in that tiny cell, he had thought of so many things he wished to tell Wei Ying, so many things he wanted to share, but now that he had the chance he did not know how. He didn’t know how to explain how deeply his love really ran, he didn’t know how to say that Wei Ying was the best and brightest thing to have ever come into his life. He didn’t know how to make the promises he’d wished he could make in that cell, how to say the things he thought would come so easily if only he had the chance to see Wei Ying once more, just once more. Now, the words were just as difficult as ever – more difficult than ever. Seeing Wei Ying’s beloved face, the only thing he could put into words even in the privacy of his own mind was that he did not think there *were* words strong enough to describe the things he wanted to say.

Wei Ying’s eyes were glistening with tears, and he reached out gently, smoothing his thumb over Wangji’s furrowed brow, before resting his hand on his cheek. “Lan Zhan,” he whispered again, his voice threatening to break. “Oh, Lan Zhan...” It had to be the dozenth time Wei Ying had said his name in five minutes, but Wangji would listen to Wei Ying say his name for an eternity.

“Wei Ying,” he breathed, reaching for Wei Ying’s other hand. He found it in a heartbeat, and Wei Ying’s fingers entwined with his.

“Lan Zhan, I love you so much,” Wei Ying whispered, trying to smile. “You know that, right? You know that I love you more than *anything*.”

“I know,” Wangji promised, though he still marvelled it. “I love you.” It wasn’t enough. It didn’t – it didn’t describe half of what he felt, it wasn’t, it didn’t – “I love you. Always loved you – will *always* love you. I – I don’t have the words to tell you how much. I wish I did. But I love you.”

“Lan Zhan,” Wei Ying whispered, his eyes full of tears even as he beamed. “Lan Zhan. I love you. I love you.” He leant forward, kissing Wangji gently. “I love you so much.” Then, he stroked Wangji’s cheek, his smile growing softer. “You should get some sleep, Lan Zhan. I’ll stay right here with you, I promise. You’re safe now. I promise.”

“Mn,” Wangji breathed, but he didn’t want to close his eyes. He wanted to keep gazing at Wei Ying for as long as he could.

“Oh!” Wei Ying said, an idea lighting his eyes. “Hang on a second!” He let go of Wangji, springing off the bed, and Wangji had to cling to his resolve to keep from protesting.

His cheek and his hand felt cold without the touch of Wei Ying’s hands, and he watched as the other man hurried to a small chest in the corner of the room. Wei Ying pulled out a large blanket, racing back to the bed and laying it carefully over Wangji, tucking it under his chin and smoothing it down.

“There,” he breathed, lying back down next to Wangji. “Better?”

“Mn...” Wangji let doubt into his tone. It was warmer, and arguably more comfortable, but Wei Ying wasn’t holding his hand or his cheek anymore, and therefore it couldn’t be better. He reached for Wei Ying’s hand, and when he found it, he let himself sound more enthusiastic. “Mn.”

Wei Ying laughed softly, shaking his head a little, and then he wiggled closer, wrapping his arm around Wangji’s chest, pressing a kiss to his forehead. “How about that?”

Wangji smiled. “Better.”

“Good,” Wei Ying whispered. “Now, go to sleep, Lan Zhan. I’m here.”

Letting his eyes close, Wangji sighed softly, and within minutes he sunk down into a deep and dreamless sleep.

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By the time Jiang Cheng fell into bed that night, his exhaustion was bone deep. The day had struck him with blow after blow of emotions, and even the relief of getting everyone back to Lotus Pier was strong enough to nearly overwhelm him. Then, of course, he hadn’t just been able to run away to his rooms and rest, unlike some people.

Silently, Jiang Cheng was very glad that Wei Wuxian had Lan Wangji and Sizhui to wrangle into resting, thereby all but ensuring he got some rest himself. He needed it. But out loud, Jiang Cheng had a reputation as a disgruntled younger brother to keep, so he’d let himself bitch about Wei Wuxian’s duty shirking for a while as he focused on getting everyone safe and settled.

Zewu Jun was taken straight to the doctors’ rooms, where Wen Qing swiftly brewed a bitter tea that she said would help relieve his symptoms, though she added that it would likely make him drowsy, and the quickest way for him to recover would be to sleep it off. So, Jiang Cheng had taken Lan Xichen and Lan Qiren to the nearest available room to Wei Wuxian’s, pointing out his brother’s door so that Zewu Jun knew where his own brother was.

Then, Jiang Cheng had to head straight back to the doctors’ rooms. Jinling and Zizhen both spent about an hour there, having their wounds tended by Zhou Yuran and Wen Yingyue, the latter of whom was able to convince Wen Qing to get some rest of her own, with some help from Wen Ning. When their wounds had been re-cleaned, re-assessed, and redressed, Jiang Cheng’s nephews were banished to bed for at least the rest of the day. They’d wanted to see Sizhui and Jingyi, but Yanli had gently insisted that the Lans needed their sleep, and that they could see them tomorrow.

Jiang Cheng had reminded them that if they hadn’t run off like idiots they would have been able to see Jingyi that morning, and would also be well enough to pop in and see Sizhui when they first arrived back, but that earned him a look from A-Jie, which he thought was *very* unfair.

“I think they’ve been punished enough, A-Cheng,” she’d said, her hand running over Jinling’s hair.

After he’d helped Zixuan carry Zizhen and Jinling to bed, Jiang Cheng had to think about Meng Yao, which he had so far been able to avoid. Nie Mingjue and Jiang Jianyu had secured him in Lotus Pier’s small dungeon, and someone had provided a blanket and a tray of food. He was still unresponsive, often awake, but bleary-eyed and silent, and he stared at the people around him as if gazing through mist. Without knowing exactly what the drugs in Meng Yao’s system were, Wen Qing said it was too risky to try any sort of antidote, so the plan was to let him sleep it off. The guards would monitor him, and alert Jiang Cheng of any changes.

In the meantime, Jiang Cheng was convinced there was no point wasting time trying to interrogate him, so he was able to leave the dungeons relatively quickly, but then he had to arrange for disciples to travel back to Jin Guangyao’s damned house and deal with the bodies, and then he had to talk with Nie Huaisang and Nie Mingjue about what the hell they were going to tell the rest of the world, and *then*, because the gods loved to test him, a messenger from a nearby village arrived to plead help with a ghost problem at the exact same moment that Lu Meilin arrived with Jingyi’s parents, little A-Yu, and her husband.

A headache growing tight behind his eyes, Jiang Cheng had summoned Li Xiuying to assist the messenger, and Jianyu to find somewhere for the Lans to stay.

Jianyu’s eye began to twitch at that, and Jiang Cheng couldn’t blame him. Between the Wen, the Lan Clan elders who had stayed to guard them, the time-travellers, and the Nie brothers, there was very little left in the way of available guest rooms. However, Jiang Jianyu was not second disciple for nothing, and when he managed to make space Jiang Cheng made a mental note to buy his cousin a nice present when he got the chance. While Jianyu was busy, Jiang Cheng had to explain to Jingyi’s family that he had been injured and that yes, it was serious, but no, he wasn’t in any danger, and it would probably be best if they waited until tomorrow to see him.

And then he had to run around checking everyone and everything, and by the time he managed to stumble back to his own rooms he was so tired that he barely had the strength to pull off his headpiece before he fell face first onto the bed, asleep in a matter of moments.

Unfortunately, it felt like he only slept *for* a matter of moments, because the next thing he knew someone was knocking on his door, and then there was a gentle hand on his back.

“A-Cheng,” his sister said. “I’m sorry to wake you, but we’ve arranged an earlier breakfast, for our Lan guests. It would probably be best if you attended.”

Trusting that it was just A-Jie in the room, and that she wouldn’t have brought someone else in while he was asleep, Jiang Cheng groaned into his pillow, half-hoping it would suffocate him back into sleep. Yanli laughed softly, rubbing his back, and Jiang Cheng pushed himself up.

“Get yourself washed up and dressed, A-Cheng,” Yanli said fondly, running a hand over his hair. “You didn’t even get undressed last night.”

Jiang Cheng just nodded, because words were hard at this time of the morning on a regular day. Yanli laughed again, leaving him to get himself sorted, and Jiang Cheng did, sighing and grumbling wordless complaints beneath his breath as he did.

Most of their guests were in the dining hall when he arrived, though Jiang Cheng was a little surprised to see Nie Huaisang among them. Given the way he was glaring at his brother even as he yawned behind his fan, the early start had been a surprise to Huaisang, too. Zixuan was not there, but Yanli told Jiang Cheng that he was staying nearby to Jinling and Zizhen so he could arrange for food to be brought to them as soon as they woke.

*Yeah, right*, Jiang Cheng thought, certain that Zixuan had gone straight back to sleep the moment Yanli left the room.

Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian weren't there either, though Jiang Cheng couldn't be quite as annoyed about that. Hanguang Jun was injured, after all, and Wei Wuxian had performed enough strong demonic cultivation, so they were likely exhausted. Even if they weren't, he doubted they would leave Sizhui's side anytime soon. Something unpleasant curled in Jiang Cheng's stomach at the thought. He hadn't been able to see much of Sizhui yesterday, or Jingyi, and he was worried about them both.

Still, soon it would be an acceptable hour to barge in and wake his lazy brother up with breakfast in bed. He would see his other two nephews then.

Slowly, the food and the tea woke Jiang Cheng up properly, and as it did his eyes fell on a yawning and miserable Nie Huaisang. A sudden thought sprang to Jiang Cheng's mind, an idea he knew for sure would cheer Huaisang up, and one that would be entertaining for him, too. As he considered it, he decided that Lan Xichen really ought to know too, and he glanced at the First Jade of Lan.

Zewu Jun looked much better for having slept, though he still looked a little weary and drawn. He sat close to Nie Mingjue, and kept his eyes down through much of the meal, but when Huaisang garbled a half-yawned question his way Lan Xichen offered a small smile. It looked genuine enough, and Jiang Cheng made up his mind. Hopefully, this would cheer up Lan Xichen too.

He set his plan into action as soon as the meal was over, inviting Zewu Jun and Nie Huaisang to accompany him for a short walk. A faint, polite confusion tugged at Lan Xichen's face, but Nie Huaisang simply looked intrigued as Jiang Cheng led them through Lotus Pier, and out to an empty dock.

There, he turned, and did his best to keep his face blank.

"There is," he said seriously, "a part of the story neither of you have been told."

He regretted his solemnity slightly when Lan Xichen went pale, but Huaisang gave a little squeak, waving his fan quickly. "Jiang-xiong, is this —"

"Yes," said Jiang Cheng, letting his grin slip onto his face. "You see, when Wen Qing said the time-travellers should get some sleep back in the Burial Mounds, they decided to have a little

chat, only Sizhui didn't want to be overheard. Unfortunately for him, he was so tired that he reversed the silencing talisman he used."

Huaisang gave a gasp of delight, and Lan Xichen's eyes widened.

"Oh, dear," he said, and Jiang Cheng nodded.

"Then he told the others – and subsequently the rest of the Burial Mounds – how he couldn't quite figure out the timeline, because Hanguang Jun said that he and Wei Wuxian weren't courting yet."

Nie Huaisang gave a shriek of delight, and Lan Xichen pursed his lips like he was trying to hide a smile.

"Tell us *everything!*" Huaisang demanded, his fan moving so fast it was a blur.

"Well, they went on to debate whether or not Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian were courting in the future," Jiang Cheng recalled, "and Jingyi was talking about how shamelessly my brother draped himself all over Hanguang Jun, of course."

"Oh dear," Lan Xichen said again, but there were definitely the beginnings of a smile on his face.

"Then," Jiang Cheng said, building on the momentum, "they were talking about some great love declaration on a staircase somewhere, something about bridges in the dark? I don't know. Anyway, Wei Wuxian was supposed to be escorting Lan Qiren to the gate, but it turns out he bolted into the woods half-way through the discussion –"

Huaisang snorted, shaking his head. "Of course, he did."

"Oh dear," Lan Xichen said for a third time. Now, there was no hiding his smile at all.

"Lan Wangji, meanwhile, walked out of that cave without a word, and when Wen Qing told him which direction my idiot brother had run off in, he walked very swiftly... in the other direction."

Jiang Cheng's feelings of glee were completely vindicated by Huaisang's gale of laughter, and by the smile on Zewu Jun's face as he closed his eyes and shook his head. It was a brother's privilege after all.

"So there," he said. "Now you know."

Huaisang's smile fell away so quickly it was almost scary. "Wait – no! Are they courting or not?"

"You'll have to ask them that yourselves," said Jiang Cheng, smirking. "It's not my business."

"Jiang-xiong!" Huaisang cried, his face the picture of betrayal.

“I think whether or not they are, it’d be something they’d like to tell people themselves,” said Jiang Cheng firmly, meeting Zewu Jun’s eye for a moment. The older sect leader gave a small nod and a grateful smile, and Jiang Cheng nodded back. Noticing the exchange, Huaisang made a noise of distress, and Jiang Cheng ignored him. “I just thought as his brother, you would enjoy the tale. And I knew you’d enjoy it too, Nie-xiong, because you are a gossip.”

Huaisang pouted, and Lan Xichen gave the surest smile that Jiang Cheng had seen from him since the rescue.

Jiang Cheng counted that as a success.

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! I really hope you enjoyed that chapter, do let me know what you think if you have the time and the desire to! Until next time, please take care.

# Chapter 37

## Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for the lovely response to the last chapter! I'm sorry that this one is a day late - real life decided to get in the way, but I hope you enjoy this belated chapter regardless!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Physically, Lan Xichen felt much better for having slept. There was a lingering sense of fatigue deep within his bones, and a faint hint of nausea in his stomach, but it was only noticeable if he focused on it. It such a stark difference to the day before that when he first woke, he'd wondered if he had just had a terrible nightmare. Then he realised that he was in Lotus Pier, and that his headband was missing, and the horror had settled deep into his heart.

Physically, Xichen felt much better. In his heart, he still felt like he was falling apart.

Everything that he had been told, everything he'd seen and felt and heard – it felt like a tsunami had crashed down upon him, battering him as it swept him away from everything he thought he'd known.

It was all so hard to believe.

It was so much harder to understand.

All Xichen wanted to do was flee – to hide away somewhere and wait until things started to make sense, until the tidal wave of grief and horror swept back out to sea, and left him with land beneath his feet again. For the first time in his life, he understood the lure of seclusion, but he knew he couldn't run. Not now.

*Goodbye, Xiongzhong.*

When he uttered those words, Wangji had believed he was going to die. Xichen knew it, and it terrified him more than anything else. Nothing he'd seen haunted him so much as the sound of his little brother's scream, as the sight of Wen Qing with her hands inside Wangji's body.

Wangji had suffered, and Xichen hadn't been there to protect him. He couldn't run away from him now.

*Er-ge, help me!*

Jin Guangyao's strangled scream was almost as haunting as Wangji's, and the memory of his blood-soaked body and his empty eyes was very nearly as terrible, but when Xichen had seen Meng Yao alive – if not altogether well – just a little of the horror seeped away. Perhaps it



was a childish thing to do, to try and separate Meng Yao and his future self, to hope that the A-Yao he knew was more than a façade on an evil face. If Jin Guangyao was the one who had done such awful things, it was easier to stomach his passing. Jin Guangyao was the man who had hurt his brother, who had tried to tear Wangji's golden core from his body and put it into his own, who'd wanted to murder Xichen's little brother just to manipulate him –

If there was still a man who had not done that, an A-Yao that Xichen knew, then there was a chance –

But was that a fool's hope, too? Xichen had not forgotten the ice in Wangji's voice when he insisted that Meng Yao was not innocent. They said that Meng Yao had planned the ambush on Wei Wuxian, that he had tried to kill his own brother, that he'd seen the Wen in the camps at Qiongqi abused and mistreated and had done nothing.

Had Xichen ever known A-Yao at all?

It was too much.

It was far too much.

The tale of the malfunctioning silencing talismans in the Burial Mounds helped – more, perhaps, than Xichen thought it would. It was just as bizarre as everything else he had heard, but infinitely more amusing, and Lan Xichen was rather certain that the situation hadn't hurt Wangji in the long run. Had his brother's humiliation been accompanied by rejection or pain Xichen might have felt differently, but he had seen the way that Wangji clung to Wei Wuxian, had seen the care in their embrace, and he was rather sure that he knew how the story ended.

It was another hope to cling to, another spark of joy among the horror of the story. If Wangji had finally confessed his feelings to Wei Wuxian, if Wangji was finally happy, that was something Xichen would hold close in his heart.

There were other small hopes in the story, floating through the flood of horror, and Xichen did what he could to cling to them, to help keep his head above the water.

As best he could, Xichen held tight to the amusement and joy that Jiang Wanyin's story had stoked in his chest as the younger clan leader led him to find his brother. As they drew nearer to Wei Wuxian's rooms, Xichen could hear chattering from inside, and Jiang Wanyin strode straight up to the door. He knocked, and then quite without waiting for an answer, strode inside.

Xichen paused at the door, unwilling to enter without being granted permission, but he did peek inside. At one end of the room were two beds, and the first was occupied by Sizhui and a boy Xichen had not met before, though it took him no longer than a second to recognise him as Lan Jingyi. He thought that even without prior knowledge, he would have seen the resemblance – the young man was the spitting image of Lan Haoran. Sizhui was lying down, while Jingyi was propped up on pillows beside him, but the boys on the other bed were both sitting up. Jinling and Zizhen were both bruised and bandaged, but they looked much better than they had when Xichen met them the previous day.

It was those two boys, however, that Jiang Wanyin rounded on when he walked through the door. “Hey! What are you two doing here? Who gave you permission to be out of bed?”

“Wen Yingyue,” said Jinling, raising his chin stubbornly, though there was a smile in his eyes as he looked up at Jiang Wanyin. “And before you have a fit, Zizhen used crutches and A-Die carried me over, so we’ve not hurt ourselves.”

“Hmph...” Jiang Wanyin crossed his arms over his chest. “I suppose it’s a good thing – now I’ve got the four of you together, there’s something I have to say.” He paused, and Xichen saw Sizhui, Jingyi and Zizhen all shift slightly, looking a little unsure. “If any of you, I mean *any* of you,” said Jiang Wanyin dangerously, “even *think* about getting yourselves stabbed again, I will break your legs.”

There was a frightened little gasp from the other side of the room, and Xichen couldn’t help but peek further around the door –

And his heart leapt.

There was a child attached to his brother’s leg, a boy who couldn’t be any older than three or four years old, clinging onto Wangji as though his life depended on it. Wangji wasn’t even pulling away, instead resting his hand on the boy’s hair and glaring at Jiang Wanyin.

“No, Cheng-shushu!” the child cried, “My gege are hurt! They, they don’t need broken legs too!”

Before Jiang Wanyin could say anything, Jinling looked over his shoulder. “It’s okay, A-Yuan!” he promised. “That’s just how Jiujiu says ‘I love you!’”

Jiang Wanyin gave a growling splutter of protest, and despite himself, Xichen felt a small laugh bubble in his chest.

“I love you?” A-Yuan echoed, sounding bewildered. “Breaking legs is I love you?”

“Not *actually* breaking legs, little radish,” said Wei Wuxian from Wangji’s side. “Threatening to. And Jinling’s right – he knows your Cheng-shushu very well.”

“Hm,” said A-Yuan, twisting his finger through his hair, before looking up at Wangji. “Rich-gege, I’ll break your legs!”

Wei Wuxian burst out laughing, and Xichen grinned as Wangji smiled, and Jiang Wanyin pinched the bridge of his nose.

“Jinling, I am going to –”

“Break my legs?” Jinling supplied, and Jiang Wanyin strode over, swatting the back of the boy’s head gently.

“No respect! Is this how you behave in front of guests?” he demanded, and Jinling frowned slightly, glancing for the first time towards the door.

The boy's eyes widened. "Zewu Jun!"

"Good morning," Lan Xichen said politely, and Wei Wuxian darted forward.

"Zewu Jun! Come in, come in!"

Xichen inclined his head, stepping inside. "Thank you," he said, bowing. Wei Wuxian, Jiang Wanyin and Wangji bowed back, the boys on the beds offering the best they could without getting up. Little A-Yuan looked curiously up at Lan Xichen, but kept his arms wrapped around Wangji's leg. Xichen couldn't help but smile. "I'm sorry to disturb you," he began, but Wei Wuxian waved his hand.

"Don't be ridiculous," he said warmly. "It's no trouble. Are you here for Lan Zhan?"

Xichen nodded slightly, and Wangji nodded back, glancing down at the child on his leg. Something on Wangji's face softened, and if Xichen had not been raised to show great self-restraint he would have squealed. He didn't think he'd ever seen anything more adorable in his life.

"A-Yuan," said Wangji quietly, "this is my brother, Lan Xichen. Xiongzhong, this is Wei Ying's son, A-Yuan."

"It's nice to meet you, A-Yuan," said Lan Xichen, smiling as he offered a bow.

"Hello," said A-Yuan, looking curiously at him.

"I must go and speak with my brother now," said Wangji, drawing A-Yuan's attention back. "Would you please let go of my leg, A-Yuan?"

At once, A-Yuan's expression dropped into a scowl, and he shook his head. "Rich-gege, you said you were staying for a while, you *said!*"

"I am not leaving Lotus Pier," said Wangji. "I will be back soon. Please let go of my leg."

Pouting, A-Yuan let go of Wangji's leg, throwing his arms up towards Wei Wuxian, who snorted, and scooped him up into his arms.

"I can show you somewhere to go if you'd like a little privacy," Wei Wuxian offered, and after a glance at Xichen, Wangji nodded. Wei Wuxian smiled, but then hesitated. "Uh, Jiang Cheng –"

"Just go," said Jiang Wanyin, looking very much like he wanted to roll his eyes. "You know your way around. It's not like I came to see *you*, anyway."

Wei Wuxian pouted, looking so much like A-Yuan that Xichen had to hide a smile. "Jiang Cheng! So cruel."

"Wei Wuxian..."

“Okay, okay, we’re going.” Wei Wuxian led Xichen and Wangji outside. As he led them through Lotus Pier, Wei Wuxian gave a steady stream of chatter, but his voice was a little calmer than usual, and his conversation focused on things like the weather, and the lake, and the lotus flowers. There were no questions to answer, nothing to give deep thought about, and Xichen was immensely grateful.

Before long, they came to a small pavilion sitting out on the lake, far enough from the rest of Lotus Pier to be private. There was a small table and some cushions, should they wish to sit, and the view was certainly stunning looking out across the lake.

“I’ll send someone out with some tea,” Wei Wuxian said, “but other than that no one will disturb you here. You know where I am if you need me.”

Wangji nodded, and Lan Xichen bowed. Wei Wuxian bowed back – as best he could with A-Yuan still perched on his hip. The boy was playing with a small blue toy, snuggled close to his father’s chest. Belatedly, Lan Xichen realised that A-Yuan had to be Sizhui’s younger self, and he wondered if soon, this version of the boy would be his nephew as well.

“Right, I’ll see you later,” Wei Wuxian said. “Say goodbye, A-Yuan.”

“Goodbye,” A-Yuan said obediently, though when Wei Wuxian began to walk away he half-clambered over the man’s shoulder to call, “I break your legs, Rich-gege!”

This time, Xichen let the laugh leave his lips. It was a small sound, a spectre of his usual laugh, and Wangji glanced at him, the smile that had touched his lips at A-Yuan’s greeting fading away.

“Xiongzhong...” Wangji paused, his eyes dark with concern as they met Xichen’s. “Are – are you in pain?”

“Physically, I am fine,” promised Xichen, unable to keep the sorrow from his smile. “Compared to yesterday it’s... well, it feels more like the end of a bad fever than anything else.” Fear coiled around his heart, begging not to ask the question when he knew he wouldn’t like the answer, but he steeled himself. “Wangji, are you?”

The fear tightened into pain as Wangji glanced away, giving Xichen all the answer he needed.

*Wangji, strapped down to a bed, Wen Qing’s scalpel in her hands, her hands in Wangji’s gut –*

*Wangji’s eyes squeezed shut, his jaw clenched, his head tilted back –*

*Wangji screaming through his teeth –*

“Xiongzhong?”

Lan Xichen opened his eyes, a shudder running through him. Wangji was standing beside him, quiet and in one piece and in *pain*, he was in pain because Jin Guangyao –

“Xiongzhong, it is tolerable,” Wangji said, his voice firm.

Xichen took a deep breath. Somehow, he had moved to the edge of the pavilion – his fingers were clenched tight around the railing. He tried to focus on it, on the grain of the wood beneath his hands, and not the fact that ‘tolerable’ meant ‘agonizing, but I’m on my feet.’ Wangji would not speak another word on it, he knew he wouldn’t, but he was hurting, and Xichen couldn’t fix it.

Xichen didn’t know how he would fix any of this. If it could be fixed, it would take someone smarter and stronger than him to do it.

Wangji studied him, and then added, “Wen-guniang assures me it is temporary.”

“Good,” said Xichen, but his voice came out as little more than a whisper. “Wangji...”

“I know...” Wangji paused, his brow furrowed slightly in concentration as he gathered his words. It was the same subtle expression he had made since he was a child. “I know there is much to take in. That you – care greatly for the Meng Yao you know. This... must be difficult for you.”

Xichen let his eyes flicker closed, but he nodded. “Yes.” He opened his eyes, looking at his brother carefully. “But it has been no easier for you.”

Wangji looked as though he might protest for a moment, but then his eyes glazed over slightly in memory, and for a split-second horror spasmed across his baby brother’s face. When Wangji blinked, it was gone, but Xichen had been reading his brother’s expressions since Wangji was too young to talk.

“No,” he conceded, much to Xichen’s surprise. “It... was not easy.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Xichen saw a servant already coming down the pier towards them with a tray of tea. When he drew nearer, it was apparent that Wei Wuxian had also provided food, and Xichen almost smiled. He was not hungry, but he was not sure whether Wangji had eaten and –

Wangji was staring at the osmanthus cake, a look on his face that Xichen couldn’t quite understand. Wangji had always been partial to the cake, as much as he was ever admittedly partial to anything, but now he looked almost haunted. The question burnt on Xichen’s tongue, but he kept it there, thanking the servant instead, and assuring him that they were happy to pour their own tea. It was a testament to how distracted Wangji was that he barely seemed to notice Xichen pouring the tea, sitting down almost as though he was in a trance.

Silently, Xichen placed Wangji’s cup before him, and waited. His brother drew in a deep breath, and then took a sip of his tea. Then, he lowered his eyes for a moment, before meeting Xichen’s gaze.

“Xiongzhang...” he said, his voice low, and a little uncertain. “Do you believe us?”

Xichen blinked. “What?”

“About time travel. Jin Guangyao. Everything. Do you believe us?” Wangji’s eyes were concerned, doubtful, and Xichen took a deep breath.

“I believe you, Wangji,” he said, making sure to meet his brother’s eye. “Of course I believe you. It... the story is hard to believe, hard to understand, but I know –” The words ‘you would never lie to me’ stuck in his throat. A week ago, he could have said the same to A-Yao. He knew his brother, he *knew* Wangji, but he thought he knew A-Yao as well – He closed his eyes for a moment, and then swallowed. “Even if I thought you were mistaken, Shufu, Da-ge, Wei-gongzi, and Jin-gongzi have all provided accounts and evidence, and after what I saw... I know that what you’re saying is the truth. I know it is. It... it’s just... difficult...”

“I understand,” said Wangji quietly. “Going forward... Meng Yao will have the opportunity to provide testimony of his own. He will be treated fairly.”

“I appreciate that,” Xichen said, though his voice stuck in his throat.

For a long moment, there was silence between them – it was not uncomfortable, but it weighed far more heavily on Xichen’s shoulders than it usually did.

Also unusually, Wangji broke the silence. “Xiongzhang, if it is any comfort, I believe Jin Guangyao cared for you. He did not wish to do you harm.”

Xichen flinched, and for the first time anger burnt among the storm of emotions in his chest. “He may have thought so,” he said, his voice trembling, “but there is *nothing* in this world he could do that would cause me more pain than what he was going to do to you. *Nothing*.”

“I know,” Wangji said quietly, lowering his eyes. “Forgive me, Xiongzhang, I spoke carelessly.”

“No!” Xichen squeezed his brother’s hand, holding until Wangji met his eyes. “No, Wangji, you didn’t. I appreciate your telling me, I understand why you did. I believe you’re probably right about his logic, twisted as it was. Nothing about this is your fault, Wangji. There’s so little of this I fully understand, but I know that, Wangji. I *know* that.”

Wangji lowered his head again. “I couldn’t find you.”

“Wangji,” Xichen murmured, but his voice broke again. It wasn’t out of character for Wangji to take more responsibility onto his shoulders than he should, to carry the blame for things he couldn’t possibly have prevented. It wasn’t out of character, and that was what broke Xichen’s heart. “I know how hard you tried. I *know*, Wangji.”

“You found me,” Wangji whispered, looking up with a heart-wrenching vulnerability in his eyes. “How? You were – you were not conscious, you...”

“I heard you say goodbye,” admitted Xichen, tears stinging at his eyes. “I... I knew you did not think you would be returning, and I was afraid. And I heard you scream –” The word strangled him, tightening his throat until he couldn’t breathe, and Xichen couldn’t help but reach out to wrap his arms around his brother. Just like yesterday, Wangji returned the

embrace whole-heartedly, practically melting into Xichen's arms, and Xichen shuddered, pulling him closer. "I love you so much, Wangji. I love you so much."

"I love you too," Wangji replied, and Xichen could feel his grip tightening. "I... I did not want to go. I wanted to fight. But if I did – he threatened Sizhui, Xiongzhang, and I couldn't..."

Xichen squeezed his eyes shut, running a hand through his brother's hair. He could hear Wangji's voice so close to breaking, and he knew that his brother was trying to hold himself together so Xichen would not have to bear his pain on top of his own. In that moment, Lan Xichen couldn't care less about his own pain.

"I can't imagine what this week has been like for you," he murmured. "I am sorry I was unable to help you through it. But I'm here now, Wangji, and if you need anything..."

Slowly, Wangji took a deep breath, and then he pulled back, sitting once again with perfect posture -though he remained close enough that their knees touched. "You are here. It is enough."

"Hm..." Xichen raised his eyebrows, and Wangji chose to ignore how utterly unconvinced he was, taking a sip of tea. For now, Xichen would not push, instead smiling a little. "So Wangji – you have a son, now."

At once, Wangji's eyes softened slightly. "Sizhui. He is..." Wangji paused for a long moment, clearly considering his words carefully. It took him almost a minute to come up with, "Wonderful."

This time, Xichen truly smiled. "I do not doubt it. I look forward to getting to know him."

Suddenly, Wangji's expression shifted – his eyes widened a fraction, and his lips pursed ever so slightly in what Xichen recognised as realisation and nervousness, respectively. Then, the tips of his ears went ever so slightly pink. Xichen felt a flutter of excitement as his brother hesitated, though he kept his expression neutral. He had an idea he knew what this was about.

"Xiongzhang," Wangji began, and then he paused.

"Yes?" Xichen prompted gently, keeping his face one of pure innocence. He watched his brother's brow furrow just a little as he tried to decide what to say.

In the end, Xichen was slightly disappointed (though entirely unsurprised) that Wangji decided to be far too formal about things. Rising to his knees, he bowed, and said, "Xiongzhang, I wish for my clan leader's blessing to enter a formal courtship with Wei Ying."

"No," said Xichen mildly, grinning as Wangji's head snapped up in shock. Seeing the look on Xichen's face, Wangji went red.

*"Xiongzhang –"*

“I’m teasing, Wangji,” Xichen assured him, his sense of amusement rising with Wangji’s rage. “I am very happy to hear it, of course you have my blessing.” Wangji glared at him, and Xichen couldn’t help but laugh. “I’m sorry, Wangji. I am. I – this makes me very happy.”

Wangji’s glare slipped away, but to Xichen’s surprise his expression was sombre. “It does?”

Xichen blinked. “Of course. Did – did you think I would disapprove? Or refuse to give my blessing? Truly refuse, I mean?”

“No,” Wangji admitted slowly. “I... I did not know that it was fair to tell you now, after everything... that has happened.”

Oh.

“Wangji,” Xichen said firmly, “your happiness could never, ever bring me anything other than joy.”

At that, Wangji finally gave a small smile, softer and shyer than Xichen had ever seen from him. “Thank you, Xiongzhang.”

“Of course. You are my brother, Wangji, and I am so glad that you are happy.”

Wangji nodded, his smile lingering. “He loves me.”

“I can see it,” Xichen said warmly. “Perhaps I might soon have two nephews.” Wangji blinked at him, and Xichen raised his eyebrows. “I presume that A-Yuan will be remaining with his father. When you marry...” The surprise on Wangji’s face made him smile again, shaking his head slightly. “Are you truly telling me you have not already thought of this?”

“I had not,” said Wangji quietly, his voice almost sad. “It... the timing was inappropriate. There was much going on.”

Xichen swallowed, and then smiled again, a little sadly this time. “There is still much going on. There almost always is. But you should discuss it with Wei Wuxian. You deserve to be very happy, Wangji, both of you.” He paused, considering. “With whom should I discuss the terms of the betrothal? I believe something was mentioned about Wei-gongzi returning officially to Yunmeng Jiang, so should it be Jiang-zongzhu?”

At the word ‘betrothal’, Wangji’s ears went pink again. “I imagine so.”

“Wonderful,” said Xichen, and he meant it. “I look forward to it.”

Soon, Xichen would have to turn his mind towards the entire scope of the future. He would need to face Meng Yao, to contribute to the discussion of what should happen to him, and he would need to hear of the investigation into the misconduct of Jin Guangshan, and ensure that the Wen were safe. He would need to turn his mind to the sticky mess of politics that had created this mess, and he would need to ensure it could never happen again.

Somehow, ridiculously, a small, childish part of Xichen thought it might all be worth it, for the fact that in this new future, he would finally get a chance to plan Wangji’s wedding.



## Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading, I hope you enjoyed it! Please do let me know what you thought, if you're so inclined - I love reading your comments. Until next time, please take care.

# Chapter 38

## Chapter Notes

Thank you for all your lovely comments last chapter! I hope that you enjoy this one!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Frankly, Nie Mingjue had been expecting it to be a day or two before Meng Yao was coherent or lucid enough to answer any of their questions. They didn't know exactly what it was he'd been drugged with, or how much he knew of what had happened. The entire way back to Lotus Pier, he had hardly stirred in Mingjue's arms, and he'd felt worryingly light and bony, as though he'd barely been fed at all the entire time that he was there.

Waiting did not come easily to Mingjue, and he was sharply aware that the longer it took them to interrogate Meng Yao, the longer it would be before they could establish what they would say to the other clans. The more chance there would be for speculation. Nie Mingjue was also keen to get back to the investigation into Jin Guangshan. He was sure that the man would try and weasel his way out of it or destroy evidence, though Mingjue was confident he would be unable to. Mingjue had left Nie Zonghui in charge, and Zonghui was even sharper than he was. So, it was with frustration, but not alarm, that Mingjue resigned himself to waiting a few days for answers.

It came as a surprise to him, therefore, that he didn't have to. The day after the rescue, when the afternoon was crawling towards evening, one of the Jiang disciples found Mingjue and informed him that Meng Yao was ready to be questioned. Just minutes later, Mingjue found himself following Jiang Wanyin and Jin Zixuan to the dungeon of Lotus Pier, Xichen walking silently by his side.

They had already decided that it would be Mingjue, Xichen, Jin Zixuan, and Jiang Wanyin who would first question Meng Yao. Politically, would mean that all four great clans had representative, but moreover it was generally agreed that they had more right than anyone else to hear him speak, as the host of Lotus Pier and Meng Yao's brothers, though Mingjue was not entirely sure that he still wanted the moniker, and he wouldn't be surprised if Jin Zixuan felt the same. Xichen, on the other hand...

The thought of what this all had to be doing to Xichen burnt like acid in Mingjue's stomach. Ever since they were children, Xichen had loved too quickly, cared too deeply. Where Mingjue drowned every other emotion in anger, Xichen never seemed able to do the same – he *felt*, and it hurt him. Additionally, Mingjue had grown up distrusting every soul in the world until they gave him reason not too – and his trust was hard to earn. Somehow, Xichen had always done the opposite, never truly doubting anyone until they gave him cause to. No matter what people believed, Xichen had never been naïve – trusting, yes, but never naïve. If

there was reason to pause or to listen he would take it, and Mingjue knew that, but he was also free with his friendship, and loyal to a fault.

Mingjue had never understood it, but the thought that Xichen could lose that now made his fists clench. As if sensing his growing rage, Xichen glanced at him, offering a weak smile that did nothing to comfort Mingjue. Mingjue paused, letting Jiang Wanyin and Jin Zixuan walk a few steps ahead.

“Xichen,” he murmured, “if you are not ready for this...”

“Da-ge, I don’t know that I could ever be ready for this,” said Xichen, his voice just slightly too tight. “But I would be here all the same.” He paused, his smile growing a little sadder, yet somehow more genuine. “I am sure if it becomes too much, Nie-zongzhu will make my excuses for me.”

Mingjue nodded, squeezing Xichen’s wrist gently, and then they stepped after the others, closing the gap before either of the younger men could notice. The dungeons at Lotus Pier were different from those in the Unclean Realm – in fact, it wasn’t what Mingjue would call a dungeon at all. The previous evening, Jiang Wanyin had explained that they had a larger prison inland, a short while from Lotus Cove.

“Lotus Pier is our home,” he had said firmly. “We have no need for a prison in our home.”

What was referred to as the dungeon, therefore, were two rooms built at the very edge of the compound. Each room was split into two cells, and though from the outside they looked to be identical to any other part of the pier, inside the walls were reinforced with metal. Mingjue had little doubt as to their efficacy.

There were two cultivators standing guard outside the door, and at Jiang Wanyin’s nod they bowed and moved away, letting the four stride through.

Meng Yao was tucked away in the far cell. When they approached, he stood up hastily, if a little clumsily, one arm pressing into his stomach as though he was in pain. His eyes were wide and afraid as he looked at them, and even though he had no idea how much of it was fake, Mingjue still felt a spasm of sympathy at the younger man’s fear.

Standing side by side, the four of them stared into the cell, and Meng Yao swallowed.

“What...” His voice was an aching whisper, as though he hadn’t spoken in days, and of course, his eyes flickered first to Xichen. “Er-ge, what’s going on?”

Xichen swallowed, his voice soft but steady as he asked, “What do you know of the past week, A-Yao?”

Meng Yao shook his head slightly, his arm pressing tighter against his stomach. Mingjue wondered if he was in pain. He wondered why he still cared. “I don’t... there was... a man, a man with my face... whatever he did, it wasn’t, it wasn’t me!” Panic was creeping onto his face now, his voice growing almost desperate. “Er-ge, it wasn’t me!”

*“It wasn’t me!” Meng Yao stammered, dropping the sword of the fallen Wen soldier as Nie Mingjue’s captain fell to the ground. “It wasn’t – it was Xue Yang! Xue Yang killed him!”*

“It was, and it wasn’t,” said Nie Mingjue tightly. “That man was you, from sixteen years in the future.”

A flicker of surprise passed over Meng Yao’s face, though he did not seem entirely shocked. It was likely a possibility he had considered, however fleetingly. “I don’t... I don’t understand.”

“Before we tell you of him, and of the things he did, we have some questions for you,” said Nie Mingjue, his voice just a fraction away from a snarl. “Jin-gongzi?”

Jin Zixuan nodded, straightening ever so slightly. He looked a little pale, but his voice was quietly firm. “When you sent me to Qiongqi Pass, did you mean for me to die?” At once, what little colour Meng Yao had drained from his face, shock and horror widening his eyes, and he swayed on his feet, shaking his head almost desperately. Before he could speak, however, Zixuan continued. “We know that you and Jin-zongzhu planned the ambush. That the official intent was to either kill Wei Wuxian straight out, or in the least gain an excuse to go after him and his Stygian Tiger Amulet. We know that you planted Su She in the hills to gain control over Wen-gongzi. That you were, therefore, aware of the danger he posed to everyone in that valley. So I ask you – did you mean for me to die?”

“No!” Meng Yao cried, the word ripping out of him with such a desperate fervour that Mingjue was almost inclined to believe him. “No, I – I didn’t – I – I thought –” He looked down, looked away. He was trembling. “I... thought it might... bring trouble to you, with – with Jiang Yanli. I – I was jealous, I – I wanted – I... didn’t think, I – I...”

“But you did intend to kill my brother,” said Jiang Wanyin, Zidian crackling on his wrist.

Meng Yao raised his eyes, looking almost wearily at Jiang Wanyin. “In that, I followed only the orders of my father. What was I supposed to do?”

“Lanling Jin promised Wei Wuxian safe passage to Jinlintai,” said Xichen. “I was there, A-Yao, you knew the understanding of Gusu Lan. If you knew your father was to dishonour that agreement, why did you not tell us?”

“I could not go against my father’s wishes,” Meng Yao said quietly. “It was my duty.”

Mingjue could not help the curl of his lip. “Of course you have a duty to your father, but you had also sworn your loyalty to us! When you knew of the wicked things he was doing, and had done, you should have told us! But no. What is sworn brotherhood next to filial piety? What does it matter if you betray the good opinion of those who had looked upon you well in the past?”

Anger flickered across Meng Yao’s face, his jaw tightening. “Those who had looked well on me in the past? Who, besides Er-ge, ever looked well on me in the past?! You threw me out, Nie-zongzhu, you turned your back on me after I took a sword for you –”

“You murdered the captain of my guard!” Mingjue shouted, and beside him Xichen flinched, closing his eyes for a moment. “For the crime of calling you names! If you had told me of his behaviour I would have punished him, but he did not deserve *death* for it. And until that moment, I had never thought ill of you. And should you forget me, should you care nothing for how I cared for you, you would do well to remember Huaisang! Did he ever look down on you? He cared for you, trusted you!”

“I have never done anything to break that trust,” protested Meng Yao, though he did bow his head. “Save... save for the captain, I – but I never meant to hurt Huaisang.”

“Maybe not,” growled Mingjue. “Until the day you killed me.”

For the first time, the shock on Meng Yao’s face was tempered with confusion, and he blinked several times. “I didn’t – I wouldn’t –”

“That man who ‘wore your face’ – that version of you murdered me five years from now, using the songs from the Collection of Turmoil,” said Nie Mingjue slowly, watching the fear rise in Meng Yao’s eyes as he recognised the name.

Meng Yao’s brow furrowed, and he shook his head again. “I don’t understand, I – I wouldn’t, I *wouldn’t*, I –” He froze, eyes growing even wider, and understanding weighed on Mingjue’s heart.

“What is a sworn brotherhood next to the attention of your father?” he murmured. “If he told you to kill me, you would do it. Wouldn’t you?”

Backing away, Meng Yao shook his head, almost frantically, but he said nothing. There were no pretty words that could disprove it, no way he could deny it, when they already knew that he would. That he had.

Finally, he whispered, “I don’t understand... I don’t understand...”

Mingjue glanced at Jin Zixuan and Jiang Wanyin, who both nodded grimly, and then he looked at Xichen. He was pale, and standing so still Mingjue knew that his hands were trembling, but with a tight jaw, he nodded too.

So, Mingjue told Meng Yao of the future they had avoided. Meng Yao flinched at the mention of Zixuan’s death at Qiongqi Pass, and turned pale – and then green – when told of his marriage to Qin Su. His back slumped against the far wall at the mention of his son, and when Mingjue spoke of his own death, of the fact that Jin Guangyao had cut his head from his body and kept it in Jinlintai, Meng Yao’s knees apparently gave out. He slumped down against the wall, breathing heavily, but Mingjue continued talking, spilling out Jin Guangyao’s crimes. The death of his father, the murder of the prostitutes that had been forced to carry it out, the death of his son, of his wife. The second siege of the Burial Mounds.

The temple.

It was when Mingjue spoke of the temple that Meng Yao began to cry, tears spilling silently down his cheeks. He kept his eyes on the ground, until Mingjue mentioned that Wangji had

been stabbed. Then, Meng Yao looked frantically up at Xichen, who was trembling, and his expression crumpled. As Mingjue went over the prelude to the time-travel, Meng Yao buried his face in his hands.

He didn't look up again until Mingjue spoke of the kidnap of Lan Wangji and Lan Sizhui, and Jin Guangyao's intention for the core transfer. Then, he stared at Xichen with unmasked horror, a horror that didn't fade as the story ended, and Mingjue fell silent.

It was nearly two full minutes before Meng Yao broke the silence.

"Why am I alive?" he whispered, looking straight into Nie Mingjue's eyes. "If – if all that happened, if *I* did – if I did all that, why am I alive?"

"Because we haven't established whether you've done anything to deserve death yet," Mingjue said bluntly.

Meng Yao's brow furrowed with confusion, and his voice trembled. "But I – I did, th-those things, those awful –" He broke off, squeezing his eyes shut and pushing the back of his hand up against his mouth.

To Mingjue's surprise, it was Jiang Wanyin who broke the silence. "We're not going to be blaming anyone for things that they haven't yet done," he declared, his voice leaving no room for argument. His eyes narrowed dangerously. "However, that doesn't mean you won't be held accountable for things you *did* do."

Beside him, Jin Zixuan nodded. "Including any part you played in the mistreatment of Wen civilians at Qiongg Pass."

Meng Yao looked a little surprised, but Mingjue was not. He'd heard more from both Jin Zixuan and Lan Qiren of the testimony of the Wen, and even second hand it was haunting. It had been obvious to him how deeply both men had been affected by what they heard.

"You knew what we had agreed with Jin-zongzhu," said Xichen. "Why didn't you tell us –" He broke off, looking away, no doubt aware that the answer would be the same as before.

"I tried," Meng Yao said glumly. "Not as hard as I should have, perhaps, but... the archery tournament... I tried."

Mingjue pondered that for a moment. He certainly hadn't been pleased at the Phoenix Mountain hunt when the Wen were brought out to stand below the targets, but before there was any chance to give it much thought Wei Wuxian had stormed into the banquet and demanded the location of the prisoners. If he had not, would it had been enough for Mingjue to think about it, to look into it? In hindsight it seemed like it should be – if they Wen cultivators who had killed their soldiers, why were they not already dead? If they were civilians, why were they in chains? Why were they human shields for sport?

But maybe it wouldn't have been enough. Hindsight always made things look far clearer.

“Do you...” Meng Yao began, and then he swallowed. “Do you know that Fuqin – that he was using the camps to try and practise demonic cultivation? Not himself, he, he wouldn’t risk himself, but...”

“Yes,” said Zixuan, his voice tight and strangled. “We know that many prisoners were killed by it, including the children. The *children*, A-Yao, how – how could you see that and not –”

“I didn’t think you would care,” said Meng Yao hollowly. “You never cared about the Wen beyond the end of the war. I saw no reason you’d care for children below your station.”

Zixuan’s lips pursed so tightly the skin around them turned white, and then he shook his head. “Well, I’m sorry for whatever I did to give you that impression, but you were wrong,” he said tightly. Then, he took a shaky breath, and added, “How many? How many children died in that place? If anyone knows it’s you.”

Meng Yao sighed. “Twelve.”

Mingjue frowned. It was not that he didn’t expect Meng Yao to know the number, but compared to the number of people that had been captured, the number seemed very small.

From the look on Jin Zixuan’s face, he was thinking the same. “What?”

“There were twelve children who died,” Meng Yao said quietly. “They were the ones...” He paused, and then sighed heavily. “I was able to get most of the children out. I would tell the guards I needed them for labour, or this and that and then... just get them far enough out that they wouldn’t be recognised or missed, and then...” He shrugged, and Mingjue felt his frown deepen.

“And then you abandoned them?” he asked incredulously.

“They had as much chance as any other child on the streets,” Meng Yao said, not meeting his eyes. “I tried to get the smaller ones to orphanages, where I could. There were two of infants who were given to childless couples in Lanling. If I remember correctly, by the time Wei Wuxian got there, there were only three children left in the camp.”

“There was one,” snapped Zixuan. “One! And the others, you just abandoned? How many of them will have starved by now? How many will never know what happened to their families, how many have been ripped away from their parents –”

“I did what I could,” said Meng Yao tightly, “and I didn’t have to do it. I wasn’t supposed to do it! But I did what I could! You don’t understand – my position in Lanling was unstable, I needed to be invaluable if I wanted – I couldn’t do anything to upset my father without risking everything I’d fought to get. But yes, the idea of children dying in a prison camp upset me, so I turned them out to the streets instead. If only one child escaped with Wei Wuxian then the number that died at Qionggong was fifteen.”

“A-Yao,” Xichen said quickly, “do you know where they are? It has been two years, but we may yet be able to find some of them, to make sure they are safe.”

“I don’t know where they are, apart from the few that made it to the orphanages, but I remember which cities I left them in.” He paused. “I know which brothels the women were sold to, as well, if you care about that.”

“We do,” said Jin Zixuan tightly, instantly.

“I can write you a list,” said Meng Yao quietly. “I don’t know the names of all the women, but I imagine there are records of who came in together.”

“The orphanages, too,” said Jin Zixuan, and Meng Yao nodded.

Then, slowly, he raised his eyes to Jin Zixuan. “I – I’m sure it won’t mean much, and I – I know you have no reason to believe me, but truly, truly I didn’t mean for you to die. I didn’t want – I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

Zixuan looked away, but then he sighed heavily and looked back. “I want to believe you,” he said. The bitterness in his voice had gone, and in its place was a weariness that sounded bone deep. “I don’t know if I do, or if I can, but I want to. I am aware I have not been the best of brothers, but I hope you know that I have been trying. That I am still trying.”

Meng Yao lowered his eyes again, and in the second before they closed, Mingjue thought he saw the shine of tears in Meng Yao’s eyes. “I have not been a good brother, either. I could have killed you. I broke Er-ge’s trust with the ambush. And...” He hesitated, and then cringed in on himself, his head bowing. “D... Nie-zongzhu, I am sorry for what I said in Nightless City. What I did. I – I know how much, I know that it – but Wen Ruohan wanted to kill you for what happened to Wen Xu and – and I didn’t know how else – but I caused you pain and I killed your cultivators and I’m sorry for that. I’m sorry. I’m sorry that I could – that I would –”

An uncomfortable feeling settled in Mingjue’s throat. He had not expected Nightless City to be mentioned – it was certainly not tactical of Meng Yao to bring up what happened in the palace. They had not spoken of it again since swearing their brotherhood, but Mingjue had never truly recovered from it, and Meng Yao knew that. There was certainly no advantage in making Mingjue angrier now.

“I – I understand if...” Meng Yao choked, his head hanging lower. “I understand, Nie-zongzhu, if you wish to break our brotherhood. It – it would bring no shame upon you to do so after what I’ve – what –”

An odd feeling curled in Mingjue’s gut as Meng Yao broke off, a reluctance and regret he had not expected to feel, and he closed his eyes. Did he wish to break the brotherhood? He certainly had earlier, and he would not have hesitated for a second to do so with Jin Guangyao, but if Meng Yao was telling the truth...

If Meng Yao was telling the truth, the worst of his actions since the end of the Sunshot campaign had been following the orders of his father. As much as he loathed Jin Guangshan, and believed his actions wrong, Mingjue could not completely blame Meng Yao for being bound by filial piety, especially with his position already so precarious. But it was still possible that Meng Yao was lying.



In truth, Nie Mingjue wasn't sure what he wanted.

With a heavy sigh, he opened his eyes. "I swore brotherhood after Nightless City," he reminded Meng Yao. "You will be investigated during the course of the larger investigation into the misconduct of Lanling Jin and Jin Guangshan. If what you have lied to us regarding your role in the camps, I will renounce all brotherhood, and see that justice is served. If what you've told us is true..." He paused, his resolve steeling. "If you have told us the truth, then I see no reason to break the brotherhood. You have not betrayed me yet. Though I will tell you now, I do not trust you, and I cannot. Perhaps not ever again. And I will not stand in the way if Jin Zixuan decides to pursue justice for the attempt on his life, nor if Yunmeng Jiang seek to claim justice for the ambush on Wei Wuxian." Technically, Mingjue was not sure that Yunmeng Jiang had the right to pursue justice on Wei Wuxian's behalf when he had not, at the time, been part of Yunmeng Jiang, but that was an issue they could work out later.

Meng Yao stared blankly at him, his gaze only breaking when Jin Zixuan spoke.

"I will not," he said quietly. "This time, I will choose to believe you – or at least to act like I do. But as Nie-zongzhu said, I do not know that you will ever again have my trust." He paused. "However, if the ambush had killed Wei Wuxian, it would have devastated A-Li. For that reason..." he turned to Jiang Wanyin, and raised his eyebrows.

Jiang Wanyin's eyes hardened, and he pursed his lips. For a long moment he stared at Meng Yao, and then he shook his head slightly. "Blaming you for that ambush means nothing when it was Jin Guangshan and Jin Zixun who wanted my brother dead. But if you ever so much as threaten him again, I will kill you myself."

Despite everything, Nie Mingjue felt a flicker of amusement at that. Sometimes, Jiang Wanyin could be refreshingly blunt.

"I understand," said Meng Yao in a low voice, his eyes flicking between the four of them, always lingering on Xichen. "I – I'm not – you do not plan to kill me?"

"No," said Mingjue, folding his arms across his chest. "Though I think we'll keep you in a cell for a while, at least until the others are more comfortable with the idea of you walking free."

Meng Yao gave a weak, bitter smile. "That could be the rest of time. Not... not that I blame them..." He paused, and then shifted his position, rising to his knees. Then, he kowtowed before them. "I... I am grateful for my life. Thank you." After a long moment, he added, "I know you have no reason to believe a word I say, but I promise I will do what I can to atone for what I've done. If you provide me with paper and ink, I can write those lists for you."

"That would be a good place to start," Mingjue agreed gruffly. He glanced at Xichen, a little surprised he hadn't already told Meng Yao to get up. Xichen was staring towards Meng Yao, but his eyes were glazed over as if he wasn't really seeing, and he was very, very still. Mingjue straightened. "Well, I think it's time we report to the others, and discuss just what we're going to tell the rest of the world."

“I’ll sort the paper,” Jiang Wanyin said with a nod, so quickly Mingjue suspected he had been waiting for an excuse to leave for a while.

“Perhaps another blanket and pillow?” said Xichen quietly. “It would be more comfortable.”

“There’s no need, Er-ge,” Meng Yao began, but Mingjue knew that would make Xichen feel worse, so he looked pointedly at Jiang Wanyin, who sighed.

“I’ll send someone to grab them,” he said. “Let’s go.” With that, he strode out of the room, without another glance at Meng Yao. Jin Zixuan followed, and though he did look at Meng Yao as he left, he did not say a word.

“Come on, Xichen,” Mingjue said.

“I shall see you later, A-Yao,” murmured Xichen, and Meng Yao, still prostrated in the bow, looked up.

“Farewell, Er-ge,” he said, and then he glanced at Mingjue. “Nie-zongzhu.”

Mingjue grunted in reply, and steered Xichen out of the room. He hadn’t exactly liked it when Xichen first insisted Meng Yao call him Da-ge, but something about Meng Yao using his title sounded wrong now. Still, he wasn’t about to correct him.

Not yet.

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading, I hope you enjoyed it!

# Chapter 39

## Chapter Notes

Hi there! Sorry that this chapter's a day late, it was a tricky one to figure out in places! I hope that the wait is worth it, and that you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Sizhui spent most of the first day after the rescue dozing on and off. Wen Qing had given him a couple of different concoctions to take to help with the pain in his stomach, dulling it to a distant ache. He wasn't sure whether it was the medicine that was making him drowsy, or that he was simply exhausted from the ordeal of the last few days. Either way, there was little he could do to keep himself awake for longer than an hour or two, even with Jingyi, Jinling, and Zizhen's chatting. It felt slightly rude to be drifting off in the middle of their conversations, but when he'd tried to mumble an apology one (or all) of them had told him off.

The only time he'd felt sharply, fully awake was when Wei Wuxian took Hanguang Jun and Zewu Jun away so they could talk in private. With both of his fathers out of the room, the air had emptied out of Sizhui's lungs, and fear had poured in to replace it.

Logically, he knew that he was safe. Jin Guangyao, Su She, and Xue Yang were dead, and Meng Yao was imprisoned. Jiang Wanyin was there, bickering gently with Jinling and asking with surprising tenderness how Sizhui and Jingyi were doing. And his fathers weren't going far – they wouldn't leave Lotus Pier, and *they* would be safe, there was no reason why they wouldn't.

Logically, Sizhui knew all of this.

But Sizhui's heart didn't care about logic. It hammered fearfully in his chest the whole time they were away, his voice catching in his throat when he tried to answer Jiang Wanyin's questions. Concern had pulled the young clan leader's brow into a frown, but he hadn't pushed. Sizhui's breathing didn't even out until Wei Wuxian came back with A-Yuan on his hip. Even then, Sizhui's stomach had crawled with nerves until Hanguang Jun returned, too. The first thing Hanguang Jun did when he stepped into the room was to look for Sizhui, and offer him a small smile, and a calm washed over Sizhui so quickly and completely he was half convinced it had to be magic.

For the rest of the day, neither Hanguang Jun nor Wei Wuxian left the room for more than a few minutes. There was a steady stream of visitors coming in and out of Wei Wuxian's rooms, including Jingyi's parents and grandparents – if Sizhui had had any lingering doubts that Lan Liqin would be willing to claim him and Jingyi as his sons they were instantly banished by the familiarity of the man's calm smile and slow, deep voice. Not only did he

promise to claim and care for them both, but he also assured Wei Wuxian and Hanguang Jun that he would be Sizhui's father in name only.

"In his heart, I am sure, the role will always be filled by the two of you," he had said warmly. "I would not take the privilege of the title from you, Wangji, if it were not for their safety."

After so many years, it would be hard to break the habit of calling Lan Liqin 'Yeye,' but Sizhui did not think that calling him 'Fuqin' would feel strange for long. The relief and joy of seeing Jingyi's family had drained the energy from Sizhui with surprising speed, and to his embarrassment, he ended up nodding off before they left.

Other visitors came in and out throughout the day, but Sizhui was rarely able to keep his eyes open for more than a few hours, and he knew that there were probably visitors he missed. He even managed to nap through the reunion of A-Yu and A-Yuan, which – according to Jinling – had been earsplittingly loud, though that was shortly after Sizhui had taken another dose of medicine.

Towards the evening, however, he began to feel a little more alert, especially after dinner. It was only a few hours before nine, but he felt more awake than he had all day.

Then, just as they were finishing dinner, the atmosphere changed. Jiang Wanyin knocked on the door, and then strode in without knocking, his jaw clenched. Once again, Sizhui's head was lying in Wei Wuxian's lap to keep him propped up while he ate, and he felt his father tense beneath him.

"What's wrong?" Wei Wuxian asked, before Jiang Wanyin could say a word, and the younger man pursed his lips.

"Nothing, exactly," he said, but he sounded tense. "We need to discuss what Meng Yao told us."

"Let me guess," said Wei Wuxian, his hand resting on Sizhui's shoulder, "he had absolutely nothing to do with anything and can't believe the awful things Jin Guangyao has done."

"Not exactly..." Jiang Wanyin paused. "I'm happy to host the discussion in the sword hall, but think everyone should be around to discuss it, and obviously Sizhui and Jingyi can't move. We can't really wait – we need to figure out what we're telling people about Zewu Jun going missing." His eyes turned to Sizhui and Jingyi. "If you're too tired, you can stay here, and we'll talk in the sword hall..." The unspoken 'but' hung in the air, and Sizhui felt the rest of the room look at him, too.

"I think... I think I'd like to know what he said," he admitted, glancing up at Wei Wuxian. The man smiled down at him, the expression a little tight, but comforting all the same. "I think I'd like to be there. I – It didn't hurt too much when you carried me yesterday, Xiangege –"

Jiang Wanyin's eyes widened. "Oh no, you're not moving from that bed until Wen-guniang says you can. No, I was going to say – if you want, we could talk in here?" He glanced at Wei Wuxian. "You can say no – it's your bedroom, but..."

“I don’t care,” said Wei Wuxian, running a hand over Sizhui’s hair and looking at him and Jingyi. “As long as you two are okay with it.”

“I want to know what’s happening,” said Jingyi at once, and Sizhui nodded, as best he could.

“Good,” said Jiang Wanyin. “Now, as long as Zewu Jun, Chifeng Zun and Lan-xiansheng don’t take great offense at the break from tradition we’ll be fine. I’ll go gather everyone up.” With that, he rushed out again, leaving a sudden quiet behind him. There was an uncomfortable apprehension settling into the room, and Sizhui shifted, glancing up at Wei Wuxian.

His eyes were fixed on the door, dark and thoughtful, and there was a slight clench to his jaw. On the opposite bed, Jinling and Zizhen both looked nervous, and a foot or so away from them, Hanguang Jun had gone very still. Sitting on his knee, A-Yuan had clearly picked up on the tension, and he looked between Hanguang Jun’s face and Wei Wuxian’s with wide eyes.

“A-Die?” he asked uncertainly, even as his little fist took a hold of the front of Hanguang Jun’s robes.

At once, Wei Wuxian’s expression shifted into a wry smile, and he leant forwards. “Ah, don’t worry, little radish. We’ve just got to talk about some more boring grown-up stuff. Would you like to have a sleepover at Popo’s tonight?”

A-Yuan shook his head, looking uncertainly at Wei Wuxian. “I had a sleepover at Popo’s last night, and the one before and before. Isn’t, isn’t this s’posed to be where I live now? With you?”

“Of course it is,” said Wei Wuxian calmly. Sizhui expected him to get up and go to A-Yuan’s side, but instead he stayed where he was, his hand still combing idly through Sizhui’s hair. “But we’re still getting settled. How about you go and play with Popo, and then when we’re finished I’ll come and pick you up, and you can sleep in your own bed all night?” He nodded towards the tiny bed that was, for now, very close to Wei Wuxian’s own.

A-Yuan narrowed his eyes. “What if you’re late? And Popo’s made A-Yuan go to bed?”

“Well, that depends on what you’d like. If you want, I can carry you back here and tuck you into your bed while you’re asleep, or you can sleep in your bed in Popo’s rooms. It’s up to you.”

A look of intense concentration settled on A-Yuan’s face, as though this was the most complex thing he’d had to consider for some time. Sizhui supposed it had to be confusing – he’d been uprooted from the only home that he knew, and Wei Wuxian had promised to be his father, but since then Wei Wuxian been gone more often than he had been around. Eventually, A-Yuan nodded, and gave a heavy sigh. “Okay...”

It wasn’t long before Jin Zixuan and Jiang Yanli arrived, and Jiang Wanyin and Nie Huaisang soon after, and Hanguang Jun lifted A-Yuan gently onto the ground.

“Come,” he said, “I will take you to Popo. Say goodnight.”

“Okay, Rich-gege,” said A-Yuan, waving up at Jinling and Zizhen. “Goodnight.” Then, he flung himself across the room to cling to Wei Wuxian’s legs. Smiling, Wei Wuxian stroked his hair and pinched his nose. “Goodnight, A-Die. You’ll come pick me up?”

“Of course,” said Wei Wuxian. “Goodnight, little radish. I love you.”

“I love you, too, A-Die,” said A-Yuan, and Hanguang Jun held out his hand. A-Yuan took it happily, waving up at Jingyi and Sizhui. “Goodnight everybody!”

“Goodnight,” Sizhui chorused with the others, and Hanguang Jun led A-Yuan out of the room.

By the time Hanguang Jun got back, Wen Qing, Wen Ning, Lan Xichen, Lan Qiren, and Nie Mingjue had all arrived. It was a lot of people to fit in one room, especially around the two beds. Hanguang Jun stood beside Wei Wuxian, while Wen Ning and Wen Qing positioned themselves against the far wall between the two beds. Lan Xichen, Lan Qiren, Nie Mingjue, and Nie Huaisang stood opposite them. It made an odd, squashed sort of square shape.

“Right,” Wei Wuxian said heavily, “are we all here? What happened?”

Discomfort curled in Sizhui’s stomach as Jin Zixuan recounted what Meng Yao had said. He wasn’t sure how much he believed, but he did know that the idea of Meng Yao walking around free made his skin crawl and toes curl up.

Had Meng Yao really smuggled children out of the prison camp? Was he really as horrified by the account of his actions as he seemed to be?

There was a long moment of silence after Jin Zixuan finished speaking.

Jiang Yanli was the first to break it, and though her voice was quiet, it had the strength of steel. “I find it difficult to believe he did not intend you to die, Zixuan.”

Jin Zixuan winced slightly, his hand rubbing the back of his neck. “He sounded genuinely surprised...”

“I don’t doubt that,” said Jiang Yanli kindly. “But that’s an answer he had time to prepare.” She paused, her lips pursing as she considered her next words, an intense concentration in her eyes. “Over the last few days, Wen-gongzi and I have spoken a lot – one of the things we have discussed is how, exactly, he and A-Xian would fight. My understanding is that, for the most part, Wen-gongzi is in complete control of himself – however, due to his condition he is more susceptible to resentful energy. As such, A-Xian is able to channel that energy into Wen-gongzi and provide him with greater strength and power during a fight. In doing so, A-Xian is in control over Wen-gongzi’s actions, assuming there is no further interference. Is that right, A-Xian?”

“Essentially,” said Wei Wuxian, sounding a little uncomfortable. “It’s not – I don’t *like* controlling Wen Ning, but –”

“I don’t really know much about fighting,” said Wen Ning. “I was never really much good at it. But, when Wei-gongzi plays I... it’s strange but... I’m able to fight the way he would, I think? If that makes sense?”

“It doesn’t,” said Nie Mingjue, and Sizhui glanced at up at Wei Wuxian, who was grimacing.

“It’s hard to explain,” he said. “It’s not like I’m telling Wen Ning exactly how to move, where to hit or strike and that, it’s... through the music I can guide him – I can show him where to go, who to fight, who to leave... Subconsciously, perhaps, I also tell him how to fight? I don’t know.”

“In any case,” said Jiang Yanli, “my point is this. If Su She did nothing more than wrest control of Wen-gongzi away from A-Xian and ‘create chaos,’ in theory that should have left Wen-gongzi at the mercy of resentful energy, correct?”

“Correct,” said Wei Wuxian.

“Resentful energy wants to kill. To destroy. We all know this. So why is it that when A-Xian’s control was broken, Wen-gongzi was compelled to descend the mountain?” asked Jiang Yanli. “There were dozens of cultivators atop that hill – surely if it was not guided, the resentful energy would have driven Wen-gongzi to slaughter those people first, to wreak the most havoc, but that’s not what happened. Instead, he turned away, towards A-Xuan. Now, if he had turned to Jin Zixun it might be different – Wen-gongzi has many valid reasons to feel resent of his own towards Jin Zixun. It seems somewhat logical that his own resent could have merged with the resentful energy and driven him to kill Jin Zixun. But he didn’t – he aimed for Zixuan. As far as I am aware there is no reason for animosity between the two of them. Wen-gongzi and I wondered briefly whether it could have been a reaction to A-Xian being in danger, but that doesn’t make sense either. The cultivators atop the hill bore the most threat to A-Xian in that moment, followed by Zixun. Again, A-Xuan should not have been the target. The only logical conclusion that I can see is that Su She not only took control of Wen-gongzi from A-Xian, but he went a step further, and forced him to attack A-Xuan.”

A thunderous silence followed her words. It certainly made sense to Sizhui, though he had never really thought about it before.

After a long moment, Lan Qiren spoke. “Wen-gongzi – are you able to confirm this?”

Wen Ning shuffled uncomfortably, though his face was earnest. “No, no more than I already have, Lan-xiansheng. When I’m – like that – I, everything is very hazy. I hear the music, but I don’t – it’s hard to tell who’s playing.”

“Fuck,” said Nie Mingjue, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Fuck...”

“Theoretically,” said Hanguang Jun quietly, “Su She may have taken the initiative himself. He would have known Jin Zixuan’s death would put Meng Yao in a much greater position within Lanling Jin. If his instructions *were* simply to create chaos, he may have been the one to take it further.”

“He *was* the one that kept pushing things before,” supplied Jingyi. “At least, he was the one that brought Nie Huaisang to the temple because he thought it’d be helpful – Jin Guangyao seemed surprised to see him there. And he was the one who –” Jingyi cut off and Sizhui flinched, the image Su She stabbing his father flashing before his eyes once again. Wei Wuxian’s breath hitched slightly, and he squeezed Sizhui’s shoulder gently before returning to stroking his hair.

“It is possible,” said Jiang Yanli. “Perhaps that is what happened. But there is no way for us to tell. Even if Su She was alive, we have no guarantee that he would tell the truth. If Meng Yao did intend to kill A-Xuan, then of course he would never tell us. In any case, I am certain he knew the risk involved, that even if Wen-gongzi did simply lose control A-Xuan could have been killed. He is far too clever not to have thought of it. Moreover, there is the matter of the curse on Jin Zixun in the first place – we know that it was Su She that did it, but was that of his own accord, or by design of Meng Yao?”

“I don’t think –” Zewu Jun began, but then he closed his eyes.

“To be honest, I can’t imagine anyone needing much encouragement to curse Jin Zixun,” said Wei Wuxian.

Zizhen spoke up quietly. “In the temple, when we discovered that it was Su She who cast the curse, Jiang-zongzhu accused Jin Guangyao of being behind it. He didn’t deny it, and Su She *did* go on a rant about how much he hated men like Jin Zixun and would kill all of them, but... but even then, Jin Guangyao – he didn’t *deny* it.”

“So what are you saying?” asked Jin Zixuan wearily.

“That he cannot be trusted,” said Jiang Yanli at once. “And, that he deserves to be punished.”

Sizhui saw Zewu Jun’s head snap up, his eyes wide and almost fearful, and Sizhui had to look away.

“And what would you deem appropriate punishment, Jin-furen?” asked Nie Mingjue quietly. “Do you want to see him dead?”

“I don’t,” said Jin Zixuan, before his wife could speak. “I – I accept that he – that he’s done some awful things, but – but he’s done good things too, and if he’s telling the truth about getting children out of the camps –”

“And promptly abandoning them,” said Wei Wuxian, his voice surprisingly sharp. “Living on the streets as a child is little better than living in a place like that.”

“I do not wish to see him dead, Nie-zongzhu,” said Jiang Yanli softly. “If A-Xuan does not wish it, I would never wish otherwise. They are brothers. And... I do not think anyone here would disagree that Meng Yao – and Jin Guangyao, for that matter – would likely have never done such things if their position was less precarious. If they had not been cast aside by their own father... I believe he has potential to be a decent person. But I do not believe that we can trust him, ever again. I propose that he is confined to a residence in Jinlintai, under house



arrest. If, after a period of time, he proves that he may give a positive contribution to the world, he may be released.”

“That is not a bad idea,” said Nie Mingjue, though his voice was heavy. “But it’s already been implied to the cultivation world that Jin Guangyao was behind the plot on Jin Zixuan’s life.” He nodded at Zixuan, “You said as much yourself when you returned to Jinlintai. Jin Guangshan will want his head. As the offended party, Jin Zixuan would usually have the right to choose the punishment himself, but as clan leader Jin Guangshan can overrule it.”

Jiang Yanli considered this for a moment. “Well, there is no way that he could execute Meng Yao before the investigation into the Jin prison camps are complete, is there? He would be removing a witness, and to that we would have every right to protest. From what I have heard, Jin Guangshan will not leave that investigation with much in the way of integrity – I doubt he would be in a position to jeopardise what little ties he has to Chifeng Zun and Zewu Jun should they back up Zixuan’s desire to see his brother imprisoned as opposed to dead. Furthermore, we’ve yet to discuss where Zewu Jun is supposed to have been this week – for that, I had an idea.” She paused, as if waiting for someone else to step in.

“Please, continue, Jin-furen,” said Lan Qiren, and she inclined her head.

“Nie-gongzi said he saw Jin Guangyao and Zewu Jun disappear before A-Xuan got back to Jinlintai. We could, therefore, say that Jin-gongzi immediately regretted sending A-Xuan into trouble, and sought help from his sworn brother. Though they arrived too late to stop the ambush, they *were* able to track down Su She, who gave them some difficulty. Perhaps, for a time, they were confined, but Zewu Jun was eventually able to overpower Su She and escape. That way, there is little opportunity for Zewu Jun to be wrongfully seen as weak or easily led, and a further reason to show Meng Yao mercy.”

Lan Qiren gave a heavy sigh. “Loathe as I am to ever partake in or encourage lying, I cannot think of a better option myself. Xichen?”

“That... is a story I could tell, though I do not enjoy the idea of lying,” Zewu Jun said quietly. He was looking at the ground, and Sizhui’s heart ached for him.

“We can provide Su She’s body, too,” said Wei Wuxian. “Curse marks and all. That should put me in the clear, if anyone’s still doubting.” He gave a sharp gasp, and Sizhui jumped, looking fearfully up at him. Wei Wuxian’s eyes were rolling, and he pouted almost angrily. “Now that Su She’s dead, there’ll be no more holes in Zixun’s chest,” he huffed. “He deserves a thousand holes.”

“A-Xian,” chided Jiang Yanli gently, but beside her, Zixuan just looked exhausted.

“He’s not wrong,” he said, shaking his head slightly. He gave a heavy sigh. “I suppose that makes sense. A-Yao will be imprisoned in Jinlintai, but treated fairly. The investigation should deal with Jin-zongzhu and Zixun. We’ll say Su She was behind Zewu Jun’s disappearance. Was there anything else?”

“I don’t think so,” said Wei Wuxian, glancing around. “Unless our little time-travellers have any other bombshells they’d like to drop on us?”

“I don’t think so,” Sizhui murmured. He was starting to feel drowsy again, though he managed to stifle the coming yawn.

Then, Jinling gasped sharply. “Wait, yes, no!”

Zizhen’s eyes widened. “Oh, yeah!”

“What?” cried Wei Wuxian, Jiang Wanyin, and Nie Mingjue in almost identical tones of distress, and Jinling nodded at Nie Huaisang.

“There *was* something else, but so much was happening and I forgot and –”

“Take a breath, A-Ling,” said Jiang Yanli gently, as with a start Sizhui realised what Jinling was about to say.

A wave of panic struck him - it felt very much like something they weren't supposed to know, and the last thing he wanted was a repeat of the talisman incident, and he opened his mouth -

And he had barely started to say, “Jinling, wait –” before his friend blurted out,

“Nie Huaisang, you told us to tell you to ask your brother about the sabres.”

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading, and to everyone who's left such lovely comments. I appreciate all your support so much more than I can say! Until next time, please take care.

# Chapter 40

## Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for all your lovely comments, and for reading this far! I hope you all enjoy this chapter.

NOTE: This chapter deals a lot with the logistics/specifics of the whole 'Nie Sabre Spirit' situation, and I'm aware that some of the decisions I've made with it may not gel with people's head-canons. I've re-watched Fatal Journey, and all the episodes of CQL that deal with it, as well as read up the scenes from the novel and the good old wiki pages and cobbled together as best an interpretation as I can manage. I've tried to make the theory of it as close to canon as possible, but I'm not going to lie I still find the canon a bit confusing in regards to the sabre spirit so I've done the best I can! :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

As soon as the words left his mouth, Jinling knew he'd said something wrong. For a split second, Nie Mingjue's face went white, but then it immediately it turned red, and his eyes blazed with rage. Instinctively, Jingling shrank back against Zizhen, feeling his cheeks burn red as the man growled,

“What did you just say?”

“Mingjue-xiong,” Lan Xichen said quickly, quietly, and Jinling swallowed.

“If it's a secret nobody told us!” he exclaimed, the words practically exploding out of his mouth. “Nobody said to keep it secret!”

Nie Mingjue was breathing heavily, his glare moving between Jinling and Nie Huaisang, who looked very confused. In fact, everyone looked confused, except Nie Mingjue, who looked furious, and Lan Xichen, who seemed alarmed – something that was almost as terrifying as an angry Nie Mingjue.

“Nobody said to ‘keep it a secret?’” snarled Mingjue in disbelief, glaring at Nie Huaisang.

“I thought we weren't blaming people for what they haven't done yet,” said Nie Huaisang with a pout, but then his eyes widened, and the blood drained from his face. “Wait – wait – is this – Da-ge, what is he talking about? Is this why you weren't surprised when they said you'd *died*?”

Lan Xichen winced slightly, and Nie Mingjue's jaw clenched. The hair on the back of Jinling's neck stood up. Once, when he was little, Jinling had been jumping in the snow when he'd unexpectedly landed in a frozen puddle. His feet had crashed through the ice, and for a moment he thought he was going to be falling forever, that the freezing water was going to

close over his head and swallow him whole. He felt the same swooping sensation in his stomach now, but while back then he'd sunk only to his ankles, now he had a feeling that he'd fallen into a bigger problem than he had anticipated.

*"Da-ge!"* Nie Huaisang said tightly, almost angrily, gripping his brother's arm. "What are they talking about? What about the sabres?"

Nie Mingjue took a deep breath, glancing at his brother for just a second before fixing his gaze on Jinling instead. "What, exactly, did Huaisang say to you? In the future?"

Jinling swallowed. "Just, just that – to tell him to ask you to tell him about the sabres. We asked what he meant but he said there wasn't time to explain."

"Xian-gege did say to ask Nie Huaisang to tell him about it, too," said Sizhui quietly, glancing up at Wei Wuxian, who looked curiously at the Nie brothers. "He said that he'd try to help."

"Help?" Nie Mingjue echoed, now looking at Wei Wuxian sceptically. "And how exactly did he think he could do that?"

"He never said," said Jingyi. "There wasn't time."

"Nie-zongzhu, we're very sorry if we've brought up something that we weren't supposed to know," said Sizhui softly, and Jinling stared at him, a little surprised at the defence. Sizhui hadn't done anything, hadn't said anything – it was Jinling who'd put his foot in his mouth. "We were never told it was a secret."

Nie Mingjue stared at Sizhui for a long moment, and then his eyes fixed back on Jinling, who did his best not to cringe away. Then, after a long moment, Nie Mingjue sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose.

"Fucking hell, Huaisang," he muttered.

"Mingjue-xiong," Lan Xichen said softly, "I... I know it is not my place to say, and should you decide to take Huaisang aside and ask the rest of us to never speak of this again I will support you... But after everything that has happened, after everything we have been through... I don't know that it would be the worst thing for those in the room to know. We are already bound by secrets and trust, and perhaps a variation of minds and perspectives will come up with a solution."

"Xichen," growled Nie Mingjue, but his voice sounded wearier than it did angry. "There is no solution."

"No solution to what?" demanded Nie Huaisang, his voice rising in pitch as he tugged at his brother's arm. *"Da-ge!"*

"If there is no solution why would Huaisang and Wei-gongzi instruct them to tell of it?" argued Xichen, though he shook his head slightly as Nie Mingjue closed his eyes. Zewu Jun turned, addressing the room with a tight, weary smile. "What you have uncovered, Yu-

gongzi, is related to a very private and personal matter. As such, I pray that no one take offense should Nie-zongzhu decide to keep the details to himself.”

Jinling startled ever so slightly at being addressed as Yu-gongzi – the name was still unfamiliar, and strange. It was almost like a pair of new shoes, a little stiff, but not uncomfortable. The stifling atmosphere of the room, however, was *very* uncomfortable.

Nie Huaisang made a strangled sound, tugging at Nie Mingjue’s arm. “Da-ge! Why does Xichen-ge know if I don’t? What is going *on*? Da-ge!”

After an aching long moment, Nie Mingjue opened his eyes, staring at Lan Xichen. They exchanged what looked like a silent conversation, though Jinling knew neither of them well enough to be able to guess what such expressions might mean. Nie Huaisang made a quiet noise of impatience, though he did not speak, and then Nie Mingjue sighed, and nodded at Lan Xichen. Smiling weakly, Zewu Jun nodded back, casting the same silence spell that Sizhui had used in Qiongqi pass over the room, a blue shield shimmering over the windows and door.

Then, Nie Mingjue drew his shoulders back. “As Xichen said, this matter is extremely private – I ask that nothing said here today is ever disclosed to a single soul outside this room.”

“Of course,” said A-Niang gently, before anyone else could speak.

Nie Mingjue gave a nod, and then took a deep breath. “Well... I’m sure you all know that the Nie clan cultivate with sabres, rather than swords. It is known, too, that we use the resentful energy of beasts and creatures to cultivate our blades...”

Jinling did know that, and he’d been a little surprised when his tutor told him. He’d asked Jiujia about it, wondering why it didn’t count as demonic cultivation. The answer that no *human* energy was ever used made sense, but it had always seemed a little like a slippery slope to Jinling.

“The spirits of our sabres are strong,” said Nie Mingjue slowly. “Generations ago, they started to become too strong. During their owners’ lifetimes, the blades could be controlled, but after death their desire to kill evil beings will not fade. If left unchecked, they would cause chaos and destruction, so our sixth clan leader created stone castles as tombs for the blades of his father and grandfather to be interred in. They were buried, along with several bodies that were soon to become fierce corpses, so that the blades could continue fighting the evil spirits within the confines of the tomb.”

Hanguang Jun made a sound in the back of his throat that sounded almost like disgust, and Zewu Jun glanced at him.

“No one was killed for the purpose of a sacrifice, Wangji,” he said. “The ancestors of the Nie used only corpses.”

Lan Wangji did not look overly appeased by this – his mouth was set in a thin line, and his brow was furrowed slightly, but he did incline his head, inviting Nie Mingjue to continue.

“It is true,” said Nie Mingjue firmly. “They were the corpses of criminals and traitors, already dead. For a while, it worked – the blades were satisfied to have something to fight, and there was peace. But it did not last.” He paused, closing his eyes. “It is no secret that most of the clan leaders before me were taken by qi deviation. It is also... no coincidence.” Nie Huaisang whimpered, his fist twisting in his brother’s sleeve, and Nie Mingjue’s hand closed over it. “It is true that, if one is not careful, the use of a sabre can eventually alter your mind. That the resentful energy can poison your qi, and your temperament... It is a risk all take when they decide to train with a sabre.”

“But that doesn’t make sense!” Nie Huaisang blurted out, his face pale. “If, if that was the problem then everyone, everyone in the sect would die of qi deviation, it – it doesn’t make sense!”

Nie Mingjue nodded, opening his eyes and looking at his brother. “It does not make sense, because that is not what is happening. Not exactly.” He paused for a long moment. “There is one sabre spirit that is stronger than the others. Much stronger. It is not known how, or why. The corpses and ghosts that were always enough to balance the other sabres would not sate it, and its power and hatred are strong. The ancestors knew they would not be able to balance it in the same way as the others, so instead...” He paused again, pursing his lips for a long moment. “Instead, the ancestors bound the sabre spirit to the seat of the master. The blade of every clan leader since has played host to the energy of the sabre spirit, allowing it to fulfil its bloodlust. But the spirit will poison the blade and its wielder far sooner than any other sabre. It is the price of being zongzhu – the price to protect the rest of the clan, and all the people of Qinghe.”

Nie Huaisang had gone so pale that Jinling was sure he was going to pass out, but instead he pressed closer to his brother, his eyes wide with terror. “Da-ge – *Da-ge!*”

“*You* will be fine, Huaisang,” said Nie Mingjue in a low voice, smiling gruffly. “Given how rarely you touch your damn sabre, I doubt it will ever have the chance to –”

“Do you think I *care*?” Nie Huaisang’s voice rose to a screech. “Why would – do you – *argh!*” With a wordless cry of rage, Nie Huaisang smacked his brother’s arm with his fan, tears in his eyes, and Jinling looked away quickly. This felt very much like something private.

“Huaisang,” Nie Mingjue said, more firmly this time. “Control yourself, we are not alone –”

“I don’t care!” Nie Huaisang shrieked. “Why didn’t you tell me? Why did Lan Xichen know before I did? Why the *hell* did you keep on using a sabre if you knew it was going to kill you?”

“Because if the master of the Nie clan does not wield a sabre, the sabre spirit would break free, and wreak havoc through Qinghe. I did not tell you because I did not believe you were ready. I told Xichen when we became sworn brothers. I wondered if cleansing might help.”

Nie Huaisang’s knees buckled, though his brother caught his arm, and Jiujiu sprang up from where he’d been sitting beside Zizhen on the bed.

“Nie-xiong, sit down,” he said, but Nie Huaisang didn’t move. He just stared up at his brother blankly, until at Nie Mingjue’s nod, Jiang Cheng walked over and took his arm. Nie Huaisang didn’t protest as Jiujiu walked him to the bed and pushed him down. He simply stared into space, and suddenly Jinling felt quite cold.

He had seen Nie Huaisang look like this before.

This was what he’d looked like in the dungeon.

After a long moment, Lan Qiren spoke. “Nie-zongzhu, you say it is a specific spirit that is the cause of this? I presume there is a reason why you have not simply found the blade in question and destroyed it.”

“There is. First, it would be of great disrespect to our ancestors. Secondly, the sabre spirit is so strong that I doubt destroying the physical sword would do any good. And thirdly, the sabre in question is buried deep within the stone castles – it is almost impossible to get to.”

Lan Qiren gave a thoughtful, if somewhat disgruntled, hum, but Jinling’s eyes were drawn to Wei Wuxian. The man was frowning thoughtfully, his fingers combing through Sizhui’s hair as he stared at Nie Mingjue. But no, that’s not quite what he was staring at – instead, Wei Wuxian’s gaze was fixed just over Nie Mingjue’s shoulder, where the hilt of Baxia could be seen.

“Do you know whose it is?” Wei Wuxian asked, eyes snapping away to meet Nie Mingjue’s. “Who it belonged to in life, I mean? Do you know the sword’s name?”

“Not for certain – we believe it was the blade of Nie Nianzu, the eighth leader of our clan, but only because he was the first leader after the tombs were built to die of qi deviation. It was after the blade was interred that the trouble began, and those who survived seeing it could not tell for certain. Either way, we do not know its name.”

“Okay,” said Wei Wuxian slowly, his brow creased with concentration. “Okay...”

“Wei-xiong,” Nie Huaisang said, voice catching in his throat. “Wei-xiong, what should we do? What do we do, how –” He cut off with a slight whine, looking desperately up at his brother.

“What we do *right* now is stay calm,” said Wei Wuxian firmly, and Nie Huaisang looked fearfully at him. Wei Wuxian smiled gently. “It’s okay, Nie-xiong, we have time. If Future Me thought that I could figure it out then I’m sure I’ll –” He froze, his eyes widening, and as Nie Huaisang choked Wei Wuxian scowled up at Hanguang Jun. “Lan Zhan, I told you!” Hanguang Jun blinked, and Wei Wuxian continued. “I *told* you that if we destroyed the Stygian Tiger Amulet we’d regret it! If I still had it I could have drawn the sabre spirit into the amulet, but *no*, we had to destroy it.”

“I do not regret it,” said Lan Wangji firmly.

“We do have a piece of Yin Iron,” Zizhen suggested, glancing between Wei Wuxian and Nie Huaisang.

“We do,” Wei Wuxian allowed, “but it’s less stable, and harder to control. The Yin Iron *might* be able to absorb the sabre spirit, but if it destabilised the Yin Iron we would be in a far worse position than we are now. Even if it worked, there’s always the chance that the Yin Iron could fall into the wrong hands, and if it’s imbued with the sabre spirit that would be even worse. And it would be difficult to destroy it without re-releasing the sabre spirit, and again, we’d be right back to the first step...”

“Can you fix it?” Nie Huaisang asked desperately. “The Stygian Tiger Amulet, can you fix it?”

“Huaisang...” Nie Mingjue warned, but Wei Wuxian shook his head.

“I’m sorry, Nie-xiong. It’s gone. And I... I don’t think I could ever remake it. But don’t worry – we have time. I’ll think of something.”

“Many have tried before you, Wei-gongzi,” said Nie Mingjue heavily, and though he was addressing Wei Wuxian, his eyes were on Nie Huaisang. “You can try... but I do not think there is anything you can do.”

“I wouldn’t’ve asked to be told if I didn’t think I could help,” insisted Wei Wuxian. He paused, considering. “As soon as everyone’s healed up, I’ll come to Qinghe. In the meantime, if there’s any texts or books that you have, either about the sword spirit or the man you think it might’ve belonged to, any more information you can give me, that would be great.” Then, his voice grew a little softer. “Nie-xiong – we have time. I don’t know what I can do, but whatever it is, I’ll do my best.”

“Besides,” grumbled Jiujiu, smiling wryly. “Attempting the impossible is what we do.”

---

*Lan Zhan was screaming.*

*It was the worst sound Wei Wuxian had ever heard, a sound of desperate, wrenching agony, and Wei Wuxian ran faster, faster, faster, down the hall. The walls and the floor and the ceiling were dark stone, almost black, but at its end was a door, a door that was hanging ajar, and Wei Wuxian sprinted for it.*

*Behind it, Lan Zhan was screaming.*

*Wei Wuxian reached for Chenqing, but it wasn’t there – his belt was empty, he was weaponless, useless, and Lan Zhan, Lan Zhan was –*

*Lan Zhan stopped screaming.*

*Biting back a sob, Wei Wuxian threw himself through the door –*

*And every last piece of him broke.*

*Because Lan Zhan was lying on the floor, his arms flung out to the sides, his legs splayed with an awkward angle –*



*And his stomach – his stomach –*

*There was a great, gaping hole in Lan Zhan's stomach.*

*There was a sea of blood around him.*

*His eyes wide open.*

*Unseeing.*

*Empty.*

*He was gone.*

*“No,” Wei Wuxian keened, sinking down to his knees, and Lan Zhan's blood soaked through his trousers, and he grabbed Lan Zhan's hand –*

*And it was cold.*

*“No! No, no, no, Lan Zhan, Lan Zhan, Lan Zhan!”*

*But Lan Zhan didn't move – he didn't move because he was gone, Lan Zhan was gone – Wei Wuxian was too late and Lan Zhan was gone, gone, gone –*

*“Please!” Wei Wuxian sobbed, shaking his head, shaking Lan Zhan's shoulders, screaming as Lan Zhan's head lolled back. “No, no, please! Please, Lan Zhan, please, please, come back! Come back, Lan Zhan, Lan Zhan –” His scream caught in his throat, and he choked –*

*And then it was dark, and Wei Wuxian was lying on his back, twisted in blankets, and he was gasping for air like a man half drowned as grief and terror crashed down on top of him –*

*And at his side, someone gave a soft sigh.*

*Breathless, Wei Wuxian turned his head, and then his heart twisted.*

*Lan Zhan was lying beside him, fast asleep, looking completely and utterly peaceful.*

*Completely and utterly whole.*

*Trembling, Wei Wuxian held his fingers over Lan Zhan's nose, feeling the soft warmth of his breath, and a sob broke from his lips. He winced, quickly clamping his hand over his mouth, but the tears were burning in his eyes and up his throat, and he shuddered, squeezing his eyes closed.*

*Lan Zhan was okay.*

*He was alive.*

*But with his eyes closed, all Wei Wuxian could see was Lan Zhan *dead*, cut open, left empty, and his stomach lurched with nausea. He sat up, trying desperately to control his breathing.*

He couldn't make a sound, he couldn't cry. Lan Zhan was still healing. He didn't need to wake up and have to deal with the snivelling, shuddering mess that was Wei Wuxian.

With a start, Wei Wuxian remembered that they weren't alone in the room, either. He glanced across to A-Yuan's bed, and though it still pounded frantically in his chest his heart was warmed a little by the sight of his son, fast asleep with his mouth open, his chest rising and falling so deeply that Wei Wuxian could see it even in the dark. Further away, on the other side of the room, he could see Sizhui shifting in his sleep, and he could hear Jingyi snoring. They were alright. They were all okay.

He couldn't wake any of them.

But he couldn't stop the tears falling from his eyes, he couldn't stop his body from shuddering as he smothered his sobs behind his hand. Desperately, he tried to get a hold of himself, but as he did, he felt Lan Zhan shift beside him, heard him groan softly.

"Wei Ying?" the mumble was so quiet that, for a moment, Wei Wuxian was able to cling to the hope that Lan Zhan was talking in his sleep, but then Lan Zhan frowned, his eyes blinking open, bleary and confused. "Wei Ying?"

Wei Wuxian did his best to smile, peeling his hand away from his mouth to whisper, "It's okay, Lan Zhan, I'm okay. Go back to sleep."

But his voice was cracked and raw, and a little broken, and Lan Zhan's frown grew deeper. "Wei Ying... What's wrong?"

"Nothing! Nothing's wrong! Go back, go back to-" Despite his best efforts, Wei Wuxian's words were drowned by ragged gasps, and Lan Zhan pulled himself into a sitting position, but he winced as he did, because there was still a wound in his stomach and Wei Wuxian had woken him up in the middle of the night and –

"Wei Ying," murmured Lan Zhan, reaching out to rub the tears from Wei Wuxian's cheeks with his thumb. He held his hand there, cradling Wei Wuxian's face in his palm, and Wei Wuxian's breath caught in his throat. "You are not okay."

"I'm fine, Lan Zhan, I promise," Wei Wuxian said. "I just – just had a nightmare, that's all."

Lan Zhan stared at him for a moment, his hand still on Wei Wuxian's cheek. "Do... do you want to talk about it?"

Wei Wuxian shook his head, pursing his lips tightly together, but as he stared into Lan Zhan's sleepy, worried eyes, all he could think of was Lan Zhan's eyes empty, blank, dead –

He flinched, closing his eyes, and he felt Lan Zhan shift closer, felt the warmth of Lan Zhan's arm wrap around him. Wei Wuxian took a deep, shuddering breath, and then twisted, pressing a kiss to Lan Zhan's forehead.

"I dreamt that I was too late," he whispered, hugging Lan Zhan as tightly as he dared. "I thought you – I thought you were gone."

“Mn...” Lan Zhan’s arms shifted, and his hand move from Wei Wuxian’s face to stroke through his hair instead. “I’m not gone. You were not too late. You saved me.”

Wei Wuxian shuddered, shaking his head slightly and hiding his face in Lan Zhan’s shoulder. He tried to hide the words, too, but they broke out of him in a near-frantic whisper. “I – Lan Zhan, I don’t – I’m not as strong as you, you know? I – I don’t know if I – If we, if we *had* been too late I, I don’t know that I’d survive it, I – nothing, *nothing*, has never hurt or scared me like thinking that you and A-Zhui were – were...” A sob broke from Wei Wuxian’s lips, and he pressed his face further into Lan Zhan’s shoulder. “Lan Zhan, it was the worst thing I’d ever felt in my life, I – I thought it was going to rip me apart, I – I’m sorry, I’m sorry!”

“Why are you sorry?” Lan Zhan asked softly.

A breathless, wretched ghost of a laugh left Wei Wuxian’s chest, and he pulled back slightly to look at Lan Zhan. “I’m – I’m not what matters now, I should – I’m supposed to be, I want to be there for you, I know I, know you’re hurt and I need to be strong for you, and I just – I can’t –”

“Are you leaving?”

Wei Wuxian’s eyes widened. “What?”

Lan Zhan stared at him sombrely. “Are you going to leave me?”

“No!” Wei Wuxian hissed, because if he didn’t hiss he would scream, and the last thing he wanted was to wake anyone else.

Lan Zhan smiled sleepily. “Then you are here for me.” He paused, the smile fading, and his arms tightened around Wei Wuxian. “You would survive it. You promised A-Yuan.”

Wei Wuxian shuddered. “I did. But I – I th-thought I’d lost A-Zhui too, and...” Lan Zhan flinched, and Wei Wuxian winced, hanging his head. “I’m sorry, Lan Zhan. You don’t need – I’ll be fine, okay? Just some silly nightmares.”

“It is not silly,” said Lan Zhan. “It is understandable.” He paused, and then his voice lowered even further. “Wei Ying, if... if the positions had been reversed... I do not think it would have hurt me any less. In different ways, yes, but... It doesn’t matter. It is over. I am here. You are here. A-Zhui is safe. We are safe. You *are* here for me.” He leant forward, kissing Wei Wuxian gently. “And I am here for you. I love you.”

“I love you too,” Wei Wuxian breathed, letting his arms tighten around Lan Zhan. “I’m sorry.”

“Please stop apologising.”

“Sor-” Wei Wuxian caught himself as Lan Zhan sighed.

“Wei Ying... the sabre spirit –”

“No,” Wei Wuxian said, firmly. “We don’t need to talk about this now, Lan Zhan. We’re both too tired. But I won’t do anything reckless, I promise. Anything I try or do, I’ll run by you first, okay?”

Lan Zhan gave an unconvinced hum. “You promise?”

“I promise,” Wei Wuxian swore, pressing his forehead to Lan Zhan’s. “I love you. You should go back to sleep.”

“You too,” said Lan Zhan, and then he sank back against the bed, pulling Wei Wuxian down with him. Wei Wuxian just about managed to stifle a laugh, cuddling up against Lan Zhan until he was comfortable. Lan Zhan’s arms wrapped around him, warm and snug and tight, and then Lan Zhan gave a soft sigh, right by Wei Wuxian’s ear. “We will fix you, too.”

“Huh?”

Lan Zhan stared at him adoringly, intently, and nodded a little. “Your golden core. Have not forgotten. We will fix it.”

A lump rose in Wei Wuxian’s throat. “Lan Zhan-”

“No,” said Lan Zhan softly. “This is my promise. We will make it better.”

“Lan Zhan,” Wei Wuxian whispered, tears sparkling in his eyes even as the corner of his mouth curled into a smile. “You should know better than to make promises you might not be able to keep.”

“I do,” said Lan Zhan, kissing Wei Wuxian softly. “Now, rest.”

Wei Wuxian opened his mouth to protest, but then Lan Zhan began to hum, the sound barely audible as it rumbled through his chest, and all Wei Wuxian could do was smile, and sigh, and let Lan Zhan’s love lull him to sleep.

## Chapter End Notes

I hope that you enjoyed that chapter! Please do let me know what you thought if you have the inclination, I love hearing from you! Until next time, please take care!

# Chapter 41

## Chapter Notes

Thank you for all your lovely comments! I hope you enjoy this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

After a few more hours of uncomfortable sleep, Wei Wuxian was woken up by a little knee digging into his gut as someone very small clambered on top of him. Then, the body flopped down on top of him, snuggling up against him and winding its fists into the top of Wei Wuxian's sleep robes. Wei Wuxian cracked one of his eyes open, but A-Yuan had already closed his own eyes again, snuffling happily against Wei Wuxian's chest. With a sigh, Wei Wuxian closed his eyes, drifting back to sleep himself.

A while later, Wei Wuxian was woken up by his son again, this time by A-Yuan's adorable attempts at whispering. He was still lying on Wei Wuxian's chest, though it sounded like someone was trying to coax him away to eat.

"...but A-Die should have breakfast," he was saying. "Popo says A-Die doesn't eat enough, and, and that means he should have breakfast."

"He will have breakfast," murmured Lan Zhan calmly, his voice much quieter than A-Yuan's. "But for now, A-Die is still sleeping. He can eat later."

"Hm," said A-Yuan, sounding a little unconvinced. "I can eat here?"

"No," said Lan Zhan softly. "Bed is not an appropriate place for eating."

"Zhui-gege and Yi-gege eat in the bed!"

"Zhui-gege and Yi-gege are still very hurt. They cannot sit at the table."

"Hm..." repeated A-Yuan, and then he apparently decided to sit up, his knees and hands digging into Wei Wuxian's chest for a moment, and then he plonked himself down on Wei Wuxian's stomach, winding him.

The air forced out of Wei Wuxian's chest escaped him in a laugh, and he peeled his eyes open to see A-Yuan looking down at him with surprise. The look of shock on his face was so comical that Wei Wuxian laughed again.

"A-Die! You're awake!"

"Wei Ying," Lan Zhan said weakly, apologetically, and Wei Wuxian blinked the sleep out of his eyes to smile up at him.

“Morning,” Wei Wuxian said, though the word was quickly swallowed by a yawn.

“We were trying to be quiet,” said Lan Zhan, for some reason still apologising, and Wei Wuxian smiled fondly at him. “We have been brought breakfast.”

Wei Wuxian sniffed theatrically, and A-Yuan giggled. “Ooh, it smells good! I bet it’s Shijie’s cooking!”

“It is,” Lan Zhan confirmed.

“I wanted to wait till you woke up,” A-Yuan told Wei Wuxian sombrely. “But I’m hungry now!”

“Well, I’m awake now,” said Wei Wuxian, just as seriously. “Did you sleep well, A-Yuan?”

A-Yuan nodded, smiling almost shyly. “I just woke up in, in the night and I thought I was still at Popo’s, but then I saw I wasn’t.”

“And then you decided to use A-Die as a pillow instead of your own bed?”

A-Yuan nodded again, his grin more certain this time. “Mn!”

“Okay then,” said Wei Wuxian, pinching A-Yuan’s nose once more. “You’re going to have to get off me now, little radish, so we can get up and have breakfast.”

“Okay!” A-Yuan said, scrambling off so quickly that he winded Wei Wuxian again in the process. Wheezing through a grin, Wei Wuxian rolled out of bed, standing up with all the usual gracelessness of the morning.

“I am sorry we woke you,” said Lan Zhan, his brow furrowing slightly.

“Lan Zhan,” said Wei Wuxian, smiling wryly, “it’s fine.” He glanced across the room to see that Sizhui and Jingyi were both already awake, digging into their own breakfast. Sizhui’s neck had been propped up by a couple of pillows, and Wei Wuxian pouted. “Oh, I see – I’m not needed over there, I can be replaced by the presence of a few pillows...”

He grumbled his way across the room, pinching Sizhui’s cheek and poking Jingyi’s nose before settling himself at the nearby table. They had a lovely breakfast, and then Wei Wuxian got himself dressed and ready for the day – somehow managing to do so with A-Yuan still attached to his leg. He seemed particularly excited this morning, chattering about all the nice new food he had eaten recently, and all the games they were going to play now that A-Die was home.

When they re-joined the others, A-Yuan’s attention was quickly stolen by Jingyi and Sizhui, who were playing a game of Xiangqi. A-Yuan was mesmerised by the different pieces, and bombarded them with questions, but he was too little to understand any of the intricacies of the game. Before long, the official game had been abandoned in favour of creating a wild story of their own with the pieces. Wei Wuxian watched happily, leaning against Lan Zhan’s shoulder, and all in all he thought it was a lovely way to spend the morning.

Until Jiang Cheng walked in through the open door.

Within the span of a heartbeat, Wei Wuxian knew something was wrong. Jiang Cheng's jaw was set tight, but it wasn't a scowl – his brow was furrowed, and there was worry set in her eyes.

“What's wrong?” Wei Wuxian asked immediately, and the light chatter of the boys cut off at once. Jiang Cheng winced at the sudden silence, shaking his head slightly.

“I – there's no danger, everything's fine,” he said, offering a weak smile at Jingyi, Sizhui, and A-Yuan, before looking back at Wei Wuxian. “Can I talk to you? Alone?”

“Of course,” Wei Wuxian said, standing up. A-Yuan frowned.

“Wait – wait! Cheng-shushu, you be back soon?”

Jiang Cheng's jaw unclenched just a little, and the smile he offered to A-Yuan was a little more genuine. “We'll be back before lunchtime. I promise.”

To Wei Wuxian's relief, that was enough for A-Yuan, who smiled brightly. “Okay!” Then, he turned straight back to Jingyi, tapping on one of the tiles. “Now this elephant can fly *over* the bad men!”

Wei Wuxian squeezed Lan Zhan's hand and grinned at the boys on the bed, before following Jiang Cheng out of the door.

“What's wrong?” he asked again, and Jiang Cheng shook his head.

“Not here,” he said tightly. “Just – walk with me?”

“Okay,” Wei Wuxian said, worry growing in his chest. “Jiang Cheng...”

“Has he always been that clingy?” Jiang Cheng asked suddenly, and Wei Wuxian blinked.

“What?”

“A-Yuan. Does he always worry every time you leave the room?” Jiang Cheng's voice sounded almost flippant, but Wei Wuxian could hear the concern behind it, and he sighed.

“No, not really,” Wei Wuxian admitted. “At least he didn't back in Yiling, but-”

“You can't blame him,” said Jiang Cheng defensively, as though Wei Wuxian had been blaming anyone. “You told him you were his new father, and then he was brought here, where he's never been before, and then you disappeared for a week. Of course he's confused.”

Wei Wuxian rolled his eyes. “I wasn't exactly disappearing for fun.”

“I know that,” Jiang Cheng grumbled. “But he doesn’t. He’s three.”

“I know that,” Wei Wuxian echoed.

Jiang Cheng was quiet for a moment. He was leading Wei Wuxian out towards the place where they always used to shoot kites, walking briskly and with purpose. “He’s a good kid.”

Automatically, Wei Wuxian smiled. “He is. Of course he is, just look at his father!”

Jiang Cheng rolled his eyes, but he didn’t even try to elbow Wei Wuxian, and the concern grew stronger in Wei Wuxian’s gut. They walked in silence for a while, heading out into the woods, and then they kept walking, heading deeper into the forest until finally, Jiang Cheng stopped.

He turned around, staring at Wei Wuxian, and then he took a deep breath.

“Wei Wuxian – what you said in the Burial Mounds. Did you mean it?”

Wei Wuxian blinked. “What?”

“When you said that you wanted to come home,” Jiang Cheng said, his voice sounding horribly close to breaking. “More than anything. Did you mean it?”

If anything, Wei Wuxian was more confused. “Of course I did... Jiang Cheng, do you really think that I didn’t? That I don’t want to be here?”

Jiang Cheng pursed his lips, and for a long moment it looked like he wasn’t going to say anything. Then, he said, “What about Lan Wangji?”

“What about him?” Wei Wuxian asked, genuinely baffled, and for the first time Jiang Cheng looked irritated.

“Wei Wuxian – if you get married to Lan Wangji, what do you want to do then?”

Oh. *Oh*.

Oh.

Even as his heart fluttered at the thought of marrying Lan Zhan, realisation dropped into his stomach like a stone. He hadn’t thought about it all that much – they just hadn’t had time, and Wei Wuxian had been too afraid of losing the people he loved to daydream about futures that might never be within his reach.

But if he married Lan Zhan –

Gusu Lan would never let Lan Zhan live at Lotus Pier. Which meant that Wei Wuxian would have to live in Cloud Recess. It wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world – far from it! It would be much better than the Burial Mounds, and they would be able to go and see the rabbits, and fool around in the Cold Springs, and Wei Wuxian did love Caiyi...



“I... I suppose if... I’d have to go,” he said quietly, his voice coming out more mangled than he expected.

Jiang Cheng huffed. “That’s not what I’d asked. Not what you ‘have’ to do, not what you think people want you to do – if it was up to *you*, Wei Wuxian, just you, where would you want to live?”

And Wei Wuxian met Jiang Cheng’s eyes, and another stone of realisation dropped.

In the previous timeline, Jiang Cheng had been left alone at Lotus Pier with Jinling. This time, his siblings were alive, yes, but if Shijie was in Lanling and Wei Wuxian was in Gusu, then Jiang Cheng was still alone. Jiang Cheng was still twenty-one years old, and the head of a sect, and without his siblings.

And Wei Wuxian would still have broken his promise.

Jiang Cheng scowled. “Stop it! I didn’t tell you to think about *me*! It’s not about what I want – what do *you* want?”

Wei Wuxian scowled back. “Hey – what makes you think I was thinking about you?”

“Because you’re my da-ge, and I know your stupid face and your dumb expressions,” said Jiang Cheng sharply. “So tell me the truth – forget about everyone else. Forget what we want. What do you want?”

There was a lump in Wei Wuxian’s throat, and somehow, strangely, his eyes were stinging. “Jiang Cheng,” he said, his voice strangled. “Jiang Cheng, if it was about what I wanted of *course* I would stay here. Lotus Pier is my home, and I – I want to help you. Not because it’s what you want, or even because it’s what I promised – it – I *want* to be here for you, and help you look after the clan. But if Lan Zhan –”

“You’re sure?” Jiang Cheng interrupted, his voice as sharp as a razor. “You *want* to stay here?”

“Yes, but –”

“Good,” sighed Jiang Cheng, and then he nodded seriously. “In that case, I’ll fight for you.”

For the third time, all Wei Wuxian could do was blink and say, “What?”

Jiang Cheng raised his jaw, looking almost defensive. “You’re both men. There’s no reason that *you’d* have to be the one to leave your clan. I know Gusu Lan won’t just give up Hanguang Jun, but... If you want to stay, then I’ll try and figure out how. Maybe if, if you can *both* marry into each other’s clan, or, be an honorary member, or *something* – but if you want to stay, I’ll fight for it. I promise.”

Warmth bloomed in Wei Wuxian’s chest, so hot he could hardly breathe, and he felt his eyes widen and his mouth fall open as he stared at his brother. When he was finally able to speak, his voice came out as a strangled whisper. “Jiang Cheng...”

Jiang Cheng rolled his eyes, rubbing the back of his neck. “Don’t make this weird, Wei Wuxian.”

A laugh broke from Wei Wuxian’s throat, or maybe it was a sob, and he threw himself forward, dragging his brother into a tight hug. Jiang Cheng tugged his ponytail, but then he hugged Wei Wuxian back, his grip almost crushingly tight.

“I thought you’d be keen to get rid of me,” Wei Wuxian teased, without pulling away.

Jiang Cheng scoffed. “Not surprising. You *are* an idiot.” He paused, and then rested his bony chin on Wei Wuxian’s shoulder, digging in just enough to be annoying. But he kept his arms around Wei Wuxian. “Besides. It’s not fair on A-Yuan to just keep picking him up and then plonking him back down and saying ‘hey, this is where you live now!’ And Gusu Lan already *have* an A-Yuan, it is quite clearly our turn now.”

Wei Wuxian gave a little laugh, but then he sighed, letting his head tip to the side. Letting it rest against Jiang Cheng’s. “Didi?” he murmured hesitantly. Despite what they’d said in the Burial Mounds, he couldn’t help but fear Jiang Cheng would stiffen at the title, but instead his brother stayed where he was, even shifting his chin so it wasn’t digging quite so painfully into Wei Wuxian’s shoulder. Smiling sadly, Wei Wuxian let his eyes close. “I’m sorry that I wasn’t here. That I left you to rebuild the clan on your own. I’m not sorry for freeing the Wens or standing by them, but I *am* sorry it left you alone. And I’m sorry that when I *was* here I was so useless. After the war, I could’ve done more, I should have, but I was just...”

“A mess,” Jiang Cheng said gruffly, and Wei Wuxian gave another hollow laugh.

“Yeah, that’s true... that’s very true...”

Jiang Cheng hummed noncommittedly, and Wei Wuxian kept quiet. After a long moment, Jiang Cheng mumbled, “I should’ve helped you more, too. I didn’t realise you were... that you’d lost... You needed my help, too.”

“Yeah, but I didn’t tell you that I needed it,” said Wei Wuxian. “You couldn’t’ve known.”

“Shouldn’t’ve mattered.”

“We were all lost, A-Cheng,” Wei Wuxian murmured, and Jiang Cheng nodded against his shoulder. He gave a heavy sigh, and then finally pulled away, wiping his sleeve quickly across his eyes.

“Right,” he said, clearing his throat. “We should get back.”

Wei Wuxian nodded seriously. “Mn – if you express any more emotion you might explode.”

“Wei Wuxian!” Jiang Cheng scowled, punching his shoulder, but a smile was sparkling in his eyes. “Actually, I was going to say that it’s nearly lunchtime, because *someone* didn’t roll his arse out of bed until midmorning. And I made a promise to A-Yuan that I don’t intend to break.”

Wei Wuxian beamed, though he couldn't help but tease, too. "What, are you hoping to win the position of 'favourite uncle?'"

"Yes," insisted Jiang Cheng, without a hint of shame.

Wei Wuxian laughed, feeling so stupidly, ridiculously happy that he thought he might burst. "You know, I don't think A-Yuan *has* a list. I don't think there's any ranking."

"Well, I want to be on top of it," said Jiang Cheng firmly. "Lan Xichen hasn't been around him that much, and neither have Nie-xiong or Chifeng Zun, but —"

"Hang on, how are Huaisang and *Nie Mingjue* A-Yuan's uncles?"

"Future uncles, then," said Jiang Cheng, rolling his eyes yet again. "Did you somehow forget that Chifeng Zun and Zewu Jun are sworn brothers? Which means as soon as you marry Hanguang Jun, Lan Xichen, Nie Mingjue, and Nie Huaisang will all be A-Yuan's uncles."

"I am not sure that's how it works," said Wei Wuxian, but Jiang Cheng didn't seem to care. So, he switched track, half teasing, half genuinely curious. "What about Sishu? He's helped look after A-Yuan all his life."

Jiang Cheng's frown grew a little heavier. He was silent for almost a full minute, so long that anxiety bubbled in Wei Wuxian's stomach. If Jiang Cheng was actually less fine with the Wens being in Lotus Pier than he had been letting on... "*You* call him Sishu, right?"

"Yes," said Wei Wuxian. "Everyone calls him Sishu."

Jiang Cheng gave a smug smile. "Then it's fine — he's the generation above us. Doesn't count."

"He's still A-Yuan's *biological* uncle. Not great-uncle."

"Not our generation. Doesn't count."

"Jiang Cheng!" Wei Wuxian laughed. "For one thing, this isn't a competition, and secondly if it was you can't win it by just shuffling everyone else out of the same category as you! That's not how it works!"

"Shut up. I'm clan leader, and we're in Lotus Pier. If I say that's how it works that's how it works," Jiang Cheng said, with a grin that showed he knew how stupid he sounded. He shook his head. "It's a little disorientating, to be honest, trying to figure out how to be a good uncle. I thought I'd just have to beat *you* in terms of the best Jiujiu, and that was easy last week. I just had to make funny faces at Rulan or bounce him up and down, and he hadn't met you yet, so I was his favourite by default. Next thing I know I have six nephews and more than half of them are *teenagers* and I have no clue what I'm doing."

"Six?" Wei Wuxian asked, a small smile on his face. It wasn't as if he hadn't noticed how Jiang Cheng acted with all of the time-travellers, but it was nice hearing him say it out loud.

Jiang Cheng paused, his eyes flicking up for a moment as he counted on his fingers. “Yes, six.” Catching the look on Wei Wuxian’s face, Jiang Cheng puffed up defensively. “Well, there’s the babies and then their counterparts, and I can’t count Sizhui but not Jingyi if they’re twins because that’s just rude, and then you’ve already at least *half* adopted Zizhen, and –”

“Jiang Cheng,” Wei Wuxian said, flinging his arm over his brother’s shoulders as they came up to the kite-shooting spot. “I love you.”

Jiang Cheng went bright red and shoved his arm off. “Get off. I love you, too.” He paused, his face becoming a little more serious. “Actually, that’s... something else we need to talk about. To do.”

“What is?”

“Zizhen’s parents,” said Jiang Cheng grimly. “He wanted to see them, didn’t he?”

“He did.” Wei Wuxian tried very hard not to pull a face at the thought of Ouyang-zongzhu. Then, he sighed. “It’s not fair of us to tell him he can’t talk to them.”

“It’s not,” said Jiang Cheng, his voice even graver. “But... has Huaisang talked to you about it?”

“Huaisang?” Wei Wuxian frowned. “No, why?”

“He asked me this morning if we’ve spoken to Ouyang-zongzhu. He said it that might be better to wait until the end of the investigation into the Jin. He said he found something in Jin Guangyao’s office that didn’t look good.”

Wei Wuxian’s heart sank, and he looked sharply at his brother, who nodded grimly.

“Fuck,” Wei Wuxian breathed, rubbing his hand over his jaw. “Fuck...”

“I know.”

“Do you know what it is that he found?”

Jiang Cheng hesitated, and then stopped in his tracks, lowering his voice. “He said that he found documents that looked... that looked like proof Ouyang-zongzhu had brought labour from the camp at Qiongqi Pass.”

There was something in Jiang Cheng’s voice that made Wei Wuxian’s gut turn, and anger stir in his heart. “And?” When Jiang Cheng didn’t answer, he seized his wrist, and pressed, “Women or children? Did he take women or children?”

“It wasn’t that,” said Jiang Cheng uncomfortably. “I mean he might have done, I don’t know, but... I don’t know whether you know already, but... Two of the guards Wen Ning killed were of Baling Ouyang.”

Wei Wuxian breathed in sharply. That meant that the guards of Baling Ouyang had been among those who killed Wen Ning, who tortured and butchered him for the sport of a night-hunt – that they had been among the guards who *enjoyed* hurting prisoners. If Ouyang-zongzhu had bought labour from the prison camp, he would have known of the conditions, even if he didn't go himself.

Wei Wuxian thought of Zizhen, and a cool dread came over him. “Shit... How... how are we going to tell Zizhen?”

Jiang Cheng shook his head hopelessly. “I don't know. But... I think we have to.”

“Fuck,” Wei Wuxian breathed again. “Every time I think things are nearly over, that we're finally about to get some fucking peace...”

“You're not on your own anymore, Wei Wuxian,” said Jiang Cheng quietly, firmly. “We're all with you. We'll get through it. And then, you'll get your fucking peace.” Wei Wuxian gave a small half smile, and Jiang Cheng added, “For five minutes.” Wei Wuxian sent his brother a questioning glance, and Jiang Cheng raised his eyebrows. “You are aware that you have a toddler, right? You're not going to have peace for at least a decade, if any of the parents I know have it right.”

Wei Wuxian shook his head, smiling wryly. “I suppose.”

Jiang Cheng gave a firm nod. “Especially because as soon as he's big enough, I'm teaching A-Yuan how to throw you into the lake.”

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! I hope you enjoyed this chapter - please do let me know if you're so inclined, I adore hearing from you! Until next time, please take care.

## Chapter 42

### Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for the lovely response to the last chapter! I'm sorry this one is two days late - I've been a little busy, and also to be honest this chapter was really tricky to write, though I'm not sure why! Even so, it's up now, so I hope you enjoy it, and thank you for your patience!

Disclaimer - this chapter deals a fair bit with the topic of prostitution, and it won't be entirely historically accurate. There are a couple of reasons for this - the first and foremost being that with the canon not having a particular timeframe/era it can be tricky to figure out what **WOULD** be accurate. Possibly the biggest thing is that in the chapter I mention that many women enter the profession willingly. In almost any historical setting, that would not be the case, but since the canon already sits on the outside of real-life history, I've chosen to take a more optimistic view. Interestingly (to me anyway) while I was researching I found out that many prostitutes in Ancient China were highly educated and fairly well regarded, which obviously doesn't work with canon given how Meng Yao and his mother are treated, but I wanted to allude to it here.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Jin Zixuan had never been to a brothel before.

Jin Zixuan had never *wanted* to go to a brothel. He had seen the toll his father's disloyalty and disrespect had taken on his mother, and by the time he was sixteen, Jin Zixuan had sworn a silent oath to himself that he would never set foot in a brothel.

Yet here he was. Standing in the foyer of pleasure house with Nie Huaisang at his side and two Nie disciples behind him, waiting as the girl who had answered the door hurried to find the Madam. It was a surprisingly pleasant room, tastefully decorated, if a little well-worn. Somehow, Zixuan had imagined a grim and dirty building, but he supposed that would be off-putting to potential clients. It did make sense that the place was clean and comfortable, even welcoming, if Jin Zixuan thought about it.

According to Meng Yao, the brothels that the Wen women had been sold to were neither the expensive, high-end brothels that served the richest among the gentry, nor the cheapest, least scrupulous kind that served anyone with a copper or two to his name. The former kind, Meng Yao had explained, were largely unlikely to accept women sold against their will, while the latter wouldn't pay enough to make it worth the time of the Jin guards doing the selling. It was all far more than Zixuan had ever known against brothels before.

And this was still the last place Zixuan wanted to be. He *wanted* to be back in Lotus Pier with Jinling, so much that it hurt. Leaving while his son was on crutches had gone against every

instinct in his body, but he hadn't had much of a choice. Only two days after the rescue, Zixuan had to go back to Lanling with Lan Xichen, Lan Qiren, Nie Mingjue, and Nie Huaisang. Waiting any later to give an account of Zewu Jun's disappearance and return to the investigation would be dangerous. They had also all agreed that everything else that had to be done, such as dealing with the Nie sabre spirit and speaking with Zizhen's parents, would be much easier without the threat of Jin Guangshan breathing down their necks. That said, Zixuan was sure that Wei Wuxian was already pouring over the books and documents that Nie Huaisang had arranged to send him.

For now, Meng Yao remained imprisoned in Yunmeng. His written, signed, and sealed statements had been valuable evidence, but to Zixuan's slight surprise they almost paled besides the evidence that Nie Zonghui had collected as head of the investigation. Zixuan had never met the man before, but he clearly had the same intensity as Nie Mingjue, based on how well he had handled the investigation in their absence. In fact, it was going so well that after only a day in Lanling, Jin Zixuan and Nie Huaisang were able to begin following the other lists Meng Yao had made – the information about the women and children who had been sold and smuggled from the camps.

It was not looking good for Jin Guangshan. Not at all.

"Would you relax?" asked Nie Huaisang, fanning himself lazily. Jin Zixuan couldn't quite see, but it looked like he was smirking. "You look like you're about to walk to the gallows."

Zixuan rolled his eyes, and did not bother to dignify that with a response.

"Ooh, are you thinking about what Jiang Yanli would say if she saw you here?" asked Nie Huaisang gleefully, digging his elbow lightly into Jin Zixuan's ribs.

This time, Zixuan raised his eyebrows. "Nie-xiong, you are well aware that A-Li knows exactly what I am doing here."

"Just trying to lighten the mood," said Nie Huaisang with a shrug.

"I am not sure it's an appropriate occasion for a light mood," said Jin Zixuan, and Nie Huaisang deflated slightly.

"Hm..." he agreed, his fanning becoming somehow more purposeful. "I suppose..."

Zixuan glanced around, and lowered his voice to a hiss. "Are all brothels like this? Do – are all the women... sold into it?"

"No," said Nie Huaisang firmly. "Many prostitutes genuinely enjoy their work, and enter it out of choice. They can be very talented entertainers. I suppose for some of them that choice was born of desperation, but even so..."

Jin Zixuan shuffled uncomfortably. He wondered whether Meng Yao's mother had entered prostitution out of choice, desperation, or whether she had been sold into it against her will. He wondered if he wanted to know.

At that moment, the girl who had answered the door reappeared with an older, more finely dressed woman who had to be the Madam. Her eyes widened ever so slightly at the sight of them, and she dropped into a low bow.

“Jin-gongzi, Nie-gongzi,” she said reverently. “How many we be of service to you today?”

Jin Zixuan reached into his sleeve, pulling out a slip of paper. He passed it to the Madam as she rose from her bow. “On that date, four women were sold into your service by a disciple of Lanling Jin. We wish to buy them back.”

The woman blinked, her mouth dropping open for a moment. Quickly, she regained her composure, smiling at Jin Zixuan. Something about the expression seemed a little patronising, and he did his best not to bristle. “Jin-gongzi, this is... a most unexpected request.”

“I am sure that you keep accurate records, as according to Lanling Law,” said Jin Zixuan, thanking the heavens that Meng Yao had already talked him through this twice. “An establishment such as yours would surely never be lax towards paperwork. As such, you should be able to confirm which women entered your service on this day. It is these women, specifically, that we will be leaving with today. I assure you, we have the funds.”

The Madam’s lips pursed ever so slightly, though she was still smiling. “Gongzi... We are a small house – there are only seven women here. I simply cannot afford to part with more than half my staff in one sale.”

“Of course,” said Nie Huaisang coyly. “It is much more affordable to win the poor opinion of Lanling Jin and Qinghe Nie.”

The girl who had answered the door drew in a sharp breath, and the Madam clenched her jaw, bowing low again. “I assure you, Nie-gongzi, Jin-gongzi, I mean no disrespect.”

“Nor do we,” said Jin Zixuan. “But I have brought ample compensation with me. You are in no danger of losing your business through this sale.”

The Madam swallowed, and then rose, looking back at the piece of paper.

“We would appreciate seeing your records,” said Nie Huaisang. “That we might know we are leaving with the women we want.”

“Very well,” said the Madam quietly. “Please, come into my office.”

They followed her into a small, pleasant looking room, and she took out a large book, leafing through it until the top of the page matched the date on Zixuan’s paper. “These are the women that were brought in that day.”

Zixuan glanced down at the names and frowned slightly. There were indeed four names on the list, but they all bore the same family name, and it was not Wen. He looked carefully at the Madam.

“When they entered your service, were these the names they came with?”



“They came with names that would have brought shame upon this house,” said the Madam, a little sharply. “But I was assured that their origins would bring no legal trouble upon me.”

Irritation tugged Zixuan’s face into a frown. Of course, this woman was more interested in her own safety than that of the people she had *bought*. She hadn’t even asked what they wanted with the Wen women – for all she knew, they were buying them back to execute them.

“It will not,” he said tightly. “Assuming they are all brought here to us, that we may confirm their identities and buy their freedom.”

“Of course,” said the Madam, though he thought he could hear irritation of her own trapped behind her teeth. “Though one is currently with a client – I am afraid I cannot interrupt the session. It has already been paid for.”

“Then we will wait,” said Zixuan. “Shall we do the paperwork now?”

The Madam nodded, almost reluctantly. Zixuan read every single line of the documents twice before he signed them, and then he called in the disciples who were carrying the money. He counted out the exact amount, and then set it aside in a small chest.

“As soon as we have seen all the women, and confirmed their identities, you will get the money. Until then, we will wait.”

“Do you have a sitting area, furen?” asked Huaisang cordially, and she gave him a simpering smile. It did not meet her eyes.

“Of course. I will fetch the women who are available immediately. A-Tao, please show these gentlemen into the Lotus Room.”

The girl that had opened the door bowed, and then ducked out of the door, and Zixuan and Huaisang followed into a large, comfortable room. Zixuan took the chest of money with him, though after a nod from Nie Huaisang, the two disciples stepped outside. Almost at once, Huaisang made himself comfortable on one of the plush cushions, but Zixuan stayed on his feet, his hands clasped behind his back. After a few minutes, A-Tao returned with a tray of tea. Huaisang thanked her warmly, and Zixuan managed to nod, and then the young woman disappeared again.

Huaisang made a contented sound. “Mm, Jin-xiong, this is good tea!”

Zixuan shook his head, and tried to focus on not pacing.

“Jin-xiong. If you don’t relax a little you’re going to scare the women away.”

Zixuan looked sharply at Huaisang, who took a sip of tea and blinked innocently up at him.

Another several minutes passed, and then there was a knock on the door. It slid open, and the Madam stepped inside, followed by three younger women, each carrying a small bag. The taller two both seemed to be around Zixuan’s age, give or take, but the third girl looked little older than Jinling, and Zixuan’s stomach turned. When she saw Zixuan, the young girl

gasped and flinched, her face turning ashen pale, but the Madam glared at her, and the girl quickly bowed her head. Zixuan could see her hands trembling.

A strong hatred towards Zixun and the camps rose within him, burning up his throat like bile, but he swallowed it down and focused on the Madam instead, in time to hear her speak.

“I shall bring the other to you when her client is satisfied. In the meantime, is there anything you need? Will you be in need of a bedroom?”

“No. You may leave us,” said Zixuan, and the Madam bowed, and left the room.

Zixuan turned to look at the women, and took a deep breath.

Then, he exhaled.

Then, he cleared his throat.

“Jin-xiong,” said Nie Huaisang in a stage-whisper. “Are you going to say anything?”

Jin Zixuan glared at him, and Huaisang smiled, and took another sip of the tea. He looked up at the women, and then his eyes widened almost comically. He gave a small gasp, pointing at the women in the middle.

“Oh! I – I’ve seen you before, haven’t I, guniang?” he scrambled to his feet, and the woman’s face lost a little colour as she bowed her head. “At Dafan Mountain – you tried to kill me with a... was it a basket you had?”

Horror split across the woman’s face, and she fell to her knees to kowtow, and Zixuan seized Huaisang’s wrist.

“Nie-xiong!”

“Oh, no, don’t do that!” Huaisang cried, looking somehow surprised that the woman he had just accused of trying to murder him would panic. “No, get up, please, it wasn’t like that! You were a puppet at the time, it certainly wasn’t your fault – at least I think it was you. I remember, because there was a truly beautiful pattern on your dress, and I got distracted.”

Confusion now mingling with the fear in her eyes, the woman glanced up, but she made no effort to rise from the bow, and Huaisang gave a nervous smile.

“I’m not mad!” he said hastily. “About the basket and the attacking, it wasn’t your fault at all! I know it was all Wen Chao – he really was a despicable human being, wasn’t he?” The woman cringed, and Huaisang waved his hands. “But that’s not why we’re here!” He looked helplessly at Jin Zixuan, who glared at him. He had *thought* that the idea of bringing Huaisang along was that he would be better at the talking side of things.

Zixuan missed Mianmian.

But, Mianmian wasn’t here, so he had to do the best he could.

“Please, stand up,” he said to the bowing woman, trying his best to make his voice gentle. “Nie-xiong is right – we are aware that you were once all of the Wen Clan, and we are not here to hold you accountable for the crimes of Wen Chao or Wen Ruohan. We aren’t here to do you any harm. Please.”

Shakily, the woman rose, her dark eyes flicking between the two of them, and Zixuan gave a small smile.

“Thank you. My name is Jin Zixuan, this is Nie Huaisang. We know that you were brought here from Qiongqi Pass, and that you have suffered great harm and injustice at the hands of my clan. I am deeply sorry for it. Today, we are here to buy your freedom from this place – you will be completely free to go where you will, and do as you wish – you can even return here, if you’d like – though I would ask that, for the time being, you allow us to accompany you to Yunmeng until the investigation is over, for your own safety. May I ask your names?”

The first woman, who also seemed to be the best at covering her bewilderment with a mask of calm, gave a low bow. “This one is Wen Bao, Jin-gongzi.”

“This one is Wen Jiaying, Jin-gongzi,” murmured the woman Huaisang had recognised, with an equally low bow, and then the youngest of the three did the same.

“This one is Wen Anjing, Jin-gongzi,” she whispered.

“It’s nice to meet you all,” said Nie Huaisang, and Zixuan nodded. The names matched the ones on the Madam’s list, which was promising – particularly given that they had given their real family names, as opposed to the fake ones the Madam had written down. “I’m sure this must all be very confusing – why don’t you all sit, and we can explain how we came to be here and why we’re going to Yunmeng, et cetera, et cetera?”

The three women sat swiftly and gracefully, though it looked more like they were doing so from obedience rather than any genuine desire to be more comfortable. With a sheepish smile, Nie Huaisang returned to the pillow he had been sitting on, gesturing to Jin Zixuan to sit beside him. This time, Zixuan sat, though he did not take the tea that Huaisang offered him.

Instead, he cleared his throat, and told the three women of the investigation into Jin Guangshan, and the disgust of the other clans at discovering what, exactly, had happened at Qiongqi Pass. He briefly described Wei Wuxian’s life in the Burial Mounds, and the Wen’s subsequent move to Lotus Pier.

As he did, he noticed Wen Bao’s lips pursing tight, and he met her eyes. She blushed, ducking her gaze.

“Forgive me, Jin-gongzi, but... Lotus Pier... Wen-er-gongzi, he...”

Nie Huaisang winced. “He did burn down Lotus Pier during the war, yes. I don’t think Jiang-xiong and his clan will ever forget it, or forgive it – but they all know it was not civilians that hurt their people.”

“We are also all aware that Wen Ruohan never let women serve in his army,” added Zixuan. “It is fairly safe to assume none of you were involved – as such, Jiang-zongzhu is willing to grant you sanctuary in Yunmeng. Like I said, you do not have to come with us, but until the investigation is complete it is probably safer to do so.”

“We’re taking quite the scenic route,” added Nie Huaisang. “There are a couple more brothels to visit, as well as... what was it Jin-xiong? Two orphanages and seven towns?”

“Eight,” said Jin Zixuan, unable to keep his voice from turning grim. Those towns were the part of the task he dreaded the most – the places where Meng Yao had abandoned the children of the Wen. Apparently, just over twenty children had been smuggled out of the camps in groups of two or three, but apart from the five that had been left in the orphanages, the chances of finding any of others with no names or descriptions was crushingly slim. All they had were the dates the children had been abandoned, the places they had been left in, and an estimation of their ages.

“Mn, eight,” agreed Huaisang, nodding. “We don’t know how many people we’ll be able to track down, but we can try.” He paused to take another sip of tea, and then he hummed. “Please, everyone, relax, and have a cup of tea! It really is good. Jin-xiong, you too.”

Jin Zixuan sighed, but he took the cup when Huaisang offered it. He had a feeling the younger man was trying to make Zixuan look less intimidating, and he begrudgingly appreciated it. Heaven knew he wasn’t good at it himself.

Even more begrudgingly, he had to admit that the tea was very good.

After a long moment, the youngest girl, Wen Anjing, took a deep breath, and then glanced up. “Jin-gongzi, you – you said you spoke to some of the Dafan Wen... Did, did you meet anyone called Wen Qinqin, or Wen Yingyue?”

Zixuan nodded, remembering the conversations with the Wen in the Burial Mounds. “I spoke with Wen Yingyue, and though I haven’t met Wen Qinqin myself I know that she is among the Wen of the Burial Mounds – are you their sister?”

Wen Anjing nodded, her eyes sparkling with tears. “Are – are they okay? Do, do you know if they’re alright?”

Zixuan smiled. “I believe they are both well enough. I know that Wen Yingyue has been helping the doctor in Lotus Pier, and he speaks most highly of her.”

Wen Anjing gave a little smile of her own, wide-eyed and disbelieving. “They’re alive?” she whispered, “They’re both alive?”

Still smiling himself, Zixuan nodded. “They are both alive.”

The girl’s smile grew stronger, and she pressed a hand up to her mouth, her eyes shining. She looked excitedly at Wen Jiaying and Wen Bao, who smiled back at her, and Wen Jiaying reached out to squeeze her hand.

A warm feeling of hope rose in Zixuan's chest, and his own smile grew, but when Wen Jiaying and Wen Bao asked after their father and brothers, he recognised none of the names, and the warmth immediately died.

"I did not speak to everyone," said Zixuan quietly. "Not everyone wished to talk of it, which I understand. But..."

"We understand, Jin-gongzi," said Wen Bao, as Wen Jiaying hung her head. Wen Anjing ran her thumb over Wen Jiaying's hand, and Wen Jiaying took a deep breath. She raised her head, a brave smile on her face.

"Well, we shall be able to tell Meixiu that you were right," she said to Wen Anjing. "Your sisters are alive. That is more good news than I could hope for."

According to the list the Madam had provided, Meixiu was the name of the woman currently with a client, and Jin Zixuan could put the dots together.

"Wen Meixiu is your other sister?" asked Zixuan, and Wen Anjing nodded.

"We – we will wait for her, won't we?" she asked, and Zixuan nodded.

"Of course," Nie Huaisang said. "We're not sitting around now because Jin-xiong likes the ambiance."

"Nie-xiong."

"He's never been to a brothel before," Nie Huaisang said, hiding his face from Zixuan with his fan, and Jin Zixuan closed his eyes for a moment, praying for strength. However, the teasing seemed to put the women just a little more at ease, and so Zixuan couldn't be too annoyed.

Still. Miamian would have been able to put them at ease without humiliating Zixuan.

It was nearly two hours before the Madam returned with Wen Meixiu, and in that time Jin Zixuan mainly stewed in silence. Nie Huaisang chattered away like a canary beside him, and his cheerful, light-hearted stories drew a few smiles and quiet comments from the three women. After a short while, they offered a few stories of poems of their own, and then Zixuan listened, but for the most part it was Huaisang talking, and Zixuan tuned him out.

Worry was twisting his gut, and pounding in a headache behind his eyes. The longer they waited, the more convinced he was that the Madam was going to make trouble for them – what kind of trouble, he wasn't sure, but he didn't trust her.

Eventually, however, the door knocked, and the Madam stepped inside, bringing with her a girl of perhaps nineteen or twenty. She was half-dressed, one sleeve pulled down over her shoulder and her belt hanging open as she grappled with a small bag in one hand, and a pair of worn shoes in the other. Automatically Zixuan rose.

"This is the final girl," said the Madam, but Zixuan held up his hand to silence her, stepping forward. He met the girl's eye and held out his hands.

“Please, let me hold those for you for a moment.”

Wordlessly, fearfully, the woman put her bag and shoes into Zixuan’s hands, and then Zixuan looked pointedly away so she could adjust her clothes properly. He glanced over his shoulder, half expecting to see Huaisang gawking or blushing, or perhaps looking quickly away, but instead, the younger man was glaring at the Madam coldly. He was fanning himself slowly, very slowly, and he looked almost threatening. Zixuan was almost impressed.

After a minute or so, Wen Meixiu said softly, “Thank you, Jin-gongzi.”

He turned back to see the girl now fully dressed and covered, and he nodded, passing her belongings back. Her eyes widened slightly, as though she had not expected it, and Jin Zixuan smiled at her. Then, he turned to the Madam, clearing the smile off his face and staring at her. He saw her jaw tighten slightly, and felt a flicker of satisfaction. Nie Huaisang was not the only one able to give an icy glare, after all.

“I think it is time for us to leave. Huaisang?”

“I think so, too,” said Huaisang coldly. He also, however, did not move.

Jin Zixuan looked over his shoulder and glared meaningfully at the small chest of coin he had left on the floor beside Huaisang, and the younger man’s eyes widened.

“Oh! Right.” He scrambled to his feet and grabbed the chest, nodding at Zixuan in what he clearly thought was a business-like manner, and Zixuan rolled his eyes.

They handed over the money, and the Madam handed over the last of the documents. Jin Zixuan glanced back over the four women.

“Do you need time to gather your things?” he asked, wondering if he maybe should have mentioned this in the hours they were waiting, but Wen Jiaying bowed her head.

“We have all of our possessions,” she said, patting the small bag that she carried, and Jin Zixuan stared at it. It was barely big enough to hold a full change of clothes.

“I see,” he said bluntly, and then he looked back at the Madam. “In that case, we will be going immediately. Thank you for your time.”

Wen Meixiu hurried to put her shoes on, confusion and fear flashing across her face, but Zixuan waited for her, and then held out his hand towards the door.

“After you.”

Bowing her head, Wen Meixiu stepped through the door, and Zixuan followed, the other three women and Huaisang on his heels. They stepped out into the street, and Zixuan breathed a sigh of relief, leading the women to one of their prepared carriages.

“A-Xiu, A-Xiu, they’re alive!” Wen Anjing said breathlessly as they stepped outside, darting forward to grab his sister’s hand. “A-Qin, A-Yue, they’re alive! Jin-gongzi has spoken to A-Yue, they’re in Lotus Pier, they’re alive!”

“What?” Wen Meixiu gasped, staring between her sister and Zixuan with wide eyes, and Anjing nodded.

“They’re okay!”

“I’m sure your sister and friends will explain everything to you – we will be able to answer any questions that you have, but there are a few things we have to see to before we set off,” said Zixuan, nodding to a disciple, who held open the door to the carriage for the women. “Please, make yourselves comfortable.”

“Thank you, Jin-gongzi,” they chorused, stepping up and inside.

“Right,” said Nie Huaisang. “Next stop... whatever that next town was called. Oh, Jin-xiong, your spiritual butterflies – can they carry packages?”

Zixuan stared incredulously at Nie Huaisang. “Excuse me?”

“The golden messenger butterflies,” said Nie Huaisang impatiently, as if that was the part of the question Zixuan had struggled with. “Can they carry packages?”

“Of course not! They’re tiny, fragile snatches of spiritual energy, they’re not –”

Nie Huaisang gave a dramatic sigh, rolling his eyes and snapping open his fan. “Fine. We’ll have to find a courier before we leave then. I have some books to send to Wei-xiong.”

Jin Zixuan frowned, raising his eyebrows slightly. “More? We’ve – where did you get the time to find more books? *Where* did you find more books?!” At least once a day, Huaisang had been sending letters and texts to Wei Wuxian, and Zixuan didn’t blame him, he was sure he was concerned about his brother, but this was getting ridiculous. They were in a small town just outside of Lanling – there was no reason any bookshop here would have anything useful for Wei Wuxian.

“I have my sources,” said Nie Huaisang mildly, glancing around. “I’ll just go send them now, I’ll be right back!”

Before Zixuan could say a word, Nie Huaisang darted off into the crowd.

“I miss Mianmian,” Zixuan muttered to himself, shaking his head.

It was going to be a long few weeks.

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! I hope that you enjoyed this chapter, please do let me know what you think! Until next time, please take care.





# Chapter 43

## Chapter Notes

Thank you so much to everyone who read the last chapter, and for your patience with me! This one is, thankfully, on time, and I hope that you enjoy it!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Being away from Xichen should not be so crippling.

Lan Wangji was a grown man, and he had always been independent – he had *prided* himself on his independence – but Xiongzhong had been away for two days, and ever since he had left, Lan Wangji's lungs felt too tight in his chest. During the day, his mind kept wandering towards 'what if's, and in the night his dreams were muddled and haunted, and more than once he woke with his brother's name on his lips.

It made him feel like a child, and Wangji hated it.

If he was being rational, Wangji would consider that he had felt very similarly during the Sunshot Campaign, when he was first reunited with Xichen after the indoctrination at Qishan. For the first few days, being apart from Xiongzhong had stirred anxiety into a frenzy in Wangji's gut, but he had ignored it, and pushed past it, and after a few weeks it had faded.

But in this case, that seemed like a fool's hope. This time, his fear was not so easily ignored. This time, he was not sure it would fade so soon.

Because this time, he had *known* that he was going to lose Xichen.

Back during the indoctrination, Wangji had been able to cling to the fact that no news was good news, that if the Wen had his brother they would not hesitate to laud it in front of him. But this time, he had known that Xichen had been taken by Jin Guangyao – by a man who was as ruthless as he was clever, a man obsessed with him, and as the week wore on Wangji had felt his hope sleep away. Then, when he was imprisoned by Jin Guangyao, there had been nothing but certainty. Certainty that he was going to die. Certainty that he was never going to see Xiongzhong again.

Now, Xichen was gone. Lan Wangji knew where he was, and he knew that Shufu and Nie Mingjue would protect him – he knew that Xichen could protect *himself*, but it seemed to matter little. The anxiety still gnawed at his gut. He still wanted his Xiongzhong.

He should have a better handle on himself than this. He was twenty-two years old; he was a Jade of Lan, he was the second ranked cultivator of his generation – he should be able to control himself. It was one thing to let go of discipline in moments of turmoil or trauma, but it had been days since he was in danger. He should be better than this. Instead, he was so

undisciplined that by the second evening, he felt his throat close up and his lungs clench tight just from seeing a shadow of Xichen in Sizhui's smile. No matter how fiercely he tried, he couldn't draw a proper breath, so he excused himself quietly and headed outside, moving as quickly and purposefully as he could. He did not know where he was going, but if he looked like he did people would be less likely to stop him.

It was early evening, but the winter sky was already growing dark, and there was a chill to the wind that slapped Wangji's face. It was not pleasant, but it did at least prompt his lungs to breathe. Lotus Pier always seemed to be busy, bustling and alive, and now was no exception, but Wangji managed to weave around the Jiang disciples and servants and the Wen, avoiding all conversation, until eventually he found himself at the very end of a lonely pier.

There, alone, he let his discipline fail further. He let his breathing shudder, let his lip tremble.

He did not let himself cry. There was nothing to cry about.

He closed his eyes.

Tried to meditate.

Failed.

Tried harder.

Failed.

Heard footsteps.

"Lan Zhan?"

Even as his heart rose the way it always did at the sound of Wei Ying's voice, shame roiled in Wangji's gut, and he couldn't turn. He heard the footsteps pause, and then hasten, and then Wei Ying was at his side, and his hand was on Wangji's arm.

"Hey," he murmured, his voice soft and concerned, and he put a hand on Wangji's cheek, turning his face gently towards him. Wei Ying's eyes were dark with concern, searching Wangji's face carefully. "Lan Zhan... What's wrong?"

Wangji couldn't speak. He could not find the words. He looked down, staring at their shoes, his own white and clean and kept, Wei Ying's old and worn and dark. He swallowed, and closed his eyes.

"Lan Zhan..." Wei Ying said again, his thumb running over Wangji's cheek. Automatically, Wangji leant into the touch. "Are you in pain?" Wangji shook his head slightly, and Wei Ying lowered his voice slightly. "Is it your brother? Are you worried about Zewu Jun?"

Wangji closed his eyes tighter, his head jerking down slightly. Even he didn't know if he was nodding or bowing his head in shame.

“Oh, Lan Zhan... Of course you are. There’d be something wrong with you if you weren’t.” There was such tenderness in Wei Ying’s voice that Wangji couldn’t help but look up, and Wei Ying stared at him with a sad smile. “Of course you’re worried about him. But he’s with Chifeng-zun and your uncle, and I’ve seen Lan-xiansheng in action now – I know he won’t hesitate to throw a sword through a threat to his nephews. He’ll be back soon. You need to remember that, Lan Zhan, even if it doesn’t help you feel much better.”

“I know,” said Wangji, though his voice came out strangled, and he glanced down again.

“I know it doesn’t help,” Wei Ying said sadly, leaning against Wangji’s side and wrapping an arm around him tightly. “Every time you leave the room it feels like there’s a demon sitting on my chest, and you’re not even leaving Lotus Pier... I know it must feel awful that Zewu Jun had to go so soon.”

Wangji let himself lean against Wei Ying. He couldn’t speak, but he did nod, and Wei Ying cuddled him close, pressing a kiss to his cheek.

“He’ll be back soon,” he promised. “But in the meantime, Lan Zhan, it’s okay if you feel terrible. Obviously, I’d rather you didn’t,” Wei Ying smiled sadly. “I want you to be happy all the time. You deserve to be happy all the time. But you’ve – you’ve been through hell, Lan Zhan. It’s going to take time to heal. Okay?”

“Mn...” Wangji managed, though he couldn’t shake the feeling that he should have a better handle on himself. Some of that must have shown on his face, because Wei Ying frowned at him.

“Lan Zhan... think of it this way. Should I be angry with myself because I panic when I can’t see you?”

“No,” said Wangji at once, and Wei Ying gave a small smile. It was almost smug, though not quite. There wasn’t quite enough arrogance, and a little too much sorrow, to be smug.

“Now, I can’t quite remember if there’s a rule explicitly forbidding hypocrisy, but I know for a fact it goes against the *spirit* of them, doesn’t it?”

Wangji glared half-heartedly, but then he had to nod, and Wei Ying’s smile became a little more sincere. Despite everything, Wangji’s heart warmed at the sight of it, and Wei Ying leant in to kiss him.

“I love you,” Wei Ying whispered, his lips still brushing against Wangji’s, and a thrill ran down Wangji’s spine. “So much. It’s going to be okay.”

For the first time all day, the racing of Wangji’s heart had nothing to do with fear, and he leant closer, chasing Wei Ying’s lips and deepening the kiss, his arms winding around Wei Ying, his fingers sinking into Wei Ying’s hair, pulling him closer, closer, closer. Wei Ying’s arms wrapped around him in return, his hand stroking over Wangji’s hair, and Wangji’s heart raced faster. Instinctively, he tried to move in closer, to deepen the kiss further, and Wei Ying made a noise that made a sent another shiver down Wangji’s spine.

And then a gust of wind whipped past him, and Wangji remembered that they were outside, and in the open, and definitely not in private. Reluctantly, Wangji pulled away, and Wei Ying gave a moan of frustration that nearly broke Wangji's resolve. Very nearly.

"Lan Zhan!" Wei Ying pouted, stomping his foot on the ground, and Wangji smiled.

"Anyone could see us," he said softly, and Wei Ying's pout deepened. "Maintain your own discipline."

Wei Ying's pout deepened. "Lan Zhan! Don't you quote Lan rules at me!" But as Wangji smiled, Wei Ying's frown faltered, and a smile of his own took its place. "Urgh... how am I supposed to be annoyed at you when you smile like that?"

Lan Wangji hummed absently, and then said, "Don't be."

"Okay, Lan Zhan," said Wei Ying, sighing dramatically. "I won't be..." He slumped forward, tucking his face against Wangji's neck. His breath tickled against Wangji's neck, and Wangji took a deep breath, focusing on the sensation of his forehead ribbon against his head. With a soft sigh, he rested his cheek against the top of Wei Ying's hair.

It was strange – Wangji barely noticed time passing, but it had to be, because the evening around them was growing darker. Still, he felt calmer than he had all day, and he made no effort to move. Eventually, of course, Wei Ying grew fidgety, and then he pulled away, though he was close enough that their arms were pressed together, and their fingers entwined.

Across the water, Wangji could see the glittering lights of Lotus Cove, sparkling on the water like fireflies. It was beautiful.

"Lan Zhan..." Wei Ying's voice trailed off hesitantly, and Wangji looked at him.

"Mn?"

Wei Ying glanced at him, and then looked away quickly. "Ah, never mind... It's not important, you –"

"Wei Ying."

Wei Ying sighed, shaking his head slightly. "I... I've been meaning to speak to you for a couple of days, I... I was talking to Jiang Cheng..." He paused, and then took a deep breath. Then he swallowed, and then, he turned, looking Wangji in the eye. "Lan Zhan, do you – Do you want to marry me?"

Wangji's breath caught in his throat, his heart somehow soaring and stuttering in the same moment. On one hand, the thought of marrying Wei Ying was enough to take his breath away, but on the other, that did not sound like a proposal. It sounded almost uncertain.

Either way, however, his answer was the same. "Yes."

Wei Ying's eyes shone, and he smiled, but there was still a little uncertainty in his eyes. "You're sure?"

A flicker of uncertainty crossed Wangji's heart, and he paused. "Wei Ying... Have I done something to make you think I am not?"

"What?!" Wei Ying cried, his eyes widening so quickly there was no mistaking his surprise. "No, no, Lan Zhan! I just... no. Of course not. Of course not."

"Do..." Somehow, the words were even harder to form than usual. "Do you want to marry me?"

Wei Ying's eyes softened slightly, and his hand squeezed Wangji's tightly. "More than anything, Lan Zhan. I really, really do."

Instantly, a wave of warmth drowned Wangji's panic, and he smiled slightly. "Will you?"

Wei Ying's eyes widened, and he beamed. "Of course I will!"

"Then why are you nervous?" asked Wangji, and Wei Ying winced slightly. "What is it you wish to talk about?"

"I'm not nervous, exactly... It's just... Jiang Cheng offered to try... to try and figure out if we could... if we could stay part of our own clans, if – if we could..."

Realisation dawned in Wangji, and fond exasperation rose within him. Of course Wei Ying was struggling to speak – he was trying to talk about what *he* wanted. "You wish to live in Yunmeng. When we are married."

Wei Ying winced. "Not all the time, just – I know, I know – you're needed in Gusu, and my ties to Yunmeng Jiang seem so tenuous now, and –"

"Then we will live here."

Wei Ying froze, his mouth hanging open, his eyes wide. It was a solid five seconds before he spoke, and his word was a strangled whisper. "What?"

"We will live here," he repeated calmly. "If that is what you want."

"But – but –" Wei Ying spluttered, and Wangji was a little upset that he was so surprised. "What about your brother?"

"It will be strange, to live so far from him," Wangji conceded, ignoring the curl of panic in his gut. That wouldn't last forever. It couldn't. "But I can visit, and it is not too far by sword. We both know how to cast the Jin spiritual butterflies, and they convey messages almost instantaneously."

"But – but what would he say?"

Wangji stared at Wei Ying, raising his eyebrows ever so slightly. "Wei Ying. My brother wants me to be happy. He will not mind."

“But would you be happy?” panicked Wei Ying, looking genuinely distressed now. “You, you love Gusu, and you’re the perfect Lan, and –”

“You have not asked me to leave Gusu Lan,” said Wangji. “It is true, I would rather not. Between Xiongzhang and Jiang Wanyin they will likely be able to come to some sort of an agreement to prevent it. But... if that was the cost... I would pay it, Wei Ying. It would make you happier to stay here, wouldn’t it?”

“Lan Zhan...” Wei Ying protested, but Wangji raised his eyebrows, and Wei Ying looked away. After a long moment, he grumbled, “Yes.”

“Then we will stay,” Wangji said again. Hopefully, with enough repetition, Wei Ying would know that he meant it. “There are logical reasons to remain in Yunmeng, too. For one, you have a self-imposed responsibility to the Wen, and it is likely they will remain here.” Jiang Wanyin had already marked out a place less than a mile from Lotus Cove that would serve as a good site for a village. It was near enough to Lotus Pier that the residents would be safe, and easily protected, but far enough from Lotus Cove to give a new village an identity of its own. Wangji had to admit, it was as perfect a site as he could have found himself. “Furthermore, it will be safer for Sizhui and A-Yuan. If A-Yuan grows up in Gusu, people may be quicker to pick up on the resemblance between them.” He paused, considering, and then nodded, lowering his voice slightly. “Thirdly... I mean no disrespect, but I believe Jiang Wanyin needs you here more than Xiongzhang needs me in Gusu. I know he is capable of running Yunmeng Jiang alone, that he has done it before, but he did not expect to be clan leader at this age. It cannot be easy for him. Xiongzhang has shouldered the responsibilities longer, and has known since we were children that he would have to mantle them earlier than most. He also has the elders and Shufu to guide him. I understand why you want to remain with your brother. I support it.”

“Lan Zhan,” Wei Ying whispered, his eyes shining half with tears, half with joy. “You, you mean it?”

“Mn.”

Wei Ying gave a muffled little cry, flinging himself back against Wangji’s chest and hugging so tight it was a moment before Wangji could breathe. After a moment, Wei Ying loosened his grip, leaning back to study Lan Wangji’s face, but he kept his arms looped around Wangji’s neck.

“You’ve thought about this before! You’ve actually thought about reasons we could stay here before,” he accused, and Wangji nodded. Of course he had.

“You dislike Gusu,” he said.

To his surprise, Wei Ying seemed shocked at that statement. He frowned, his head tilting ever so slightly to the side. “What? I don’t dislike Gusu!”

It was Wangji’s turn to frown. “You said that you did.”

“When?” Wei Ying looked genuinely confused. “Lan Zhan, don’t tell me this is something else I said or heard when I was unconscious.”

“You were conscious. After-” He paused despite himself. Even now, after everything else that had happened, the mingling relief, panic, and pain he felt when they found Wei Ying after the Burial Mounds was a memory fresh enough to hurt. “The night Wen Zhuliu and Wen Chao were killed.”

Wei Ying’s eyes widened, and his nose wrinkled up. “I never meant that I didn’t *like* Gusu!” he protested. “I just didn’t want to go back to face punishment, that’s all!”

It felt like he had slapped Wangji across the face. “You thought I wanted you to face punishment?”

Wei Ying nodded slowly, studying Wangji’s eyes. “For the demonic cultivation... I... I was wrong, wasn’t I?”

Wangji nodded back, and it was a moment before he could get the words past the lump in his throat. “Just wanted to help. Was worried about you.”

Wei Ying smiled fondly, sadly, and tugged gently on the end of Wangji’s forehead ribbon. “Ah, Lan Zhan... I’ve told you once before, you know, I’m far too dense to pick up on things like that.” He paused, his face becoming serious again. “Lan Zhan... would you be happy here? I don’t want to stay if you wouldn’t be happy.”

“Will be happy if Wei Ying is happy,” said Wangji, enjoying the blush that spread over Wei Ying’s cheeks.

“Are you sure?” Wei Ying whispered, and Wangji kissed him.

“I do not lie. I am sure.”

“I love you so much,” Wei Ying choked, a tear trailing down his cheek even as he beamed, and Wangji smiled back.

“I love you, too,” he promised. Vaguely, he heard sound of scuffling footsteps, and he glanced up to see Wen Ning shuffling towards them, an expression on his face that made Wangji suspect he would be blushing if he was still wholly alive.

“Wen Ning,” Wei Ying called cheerfully, without removing his arms from Wangji’s neck. “Were you looking for us?”

“Gongzi,” said Wen Ning apologetically. “It’s nearly dinnertime. Jiang-zongzhu... he... uh...”

Wei Ying laughed. “Ah... He wanted you to come and check Hanguang Jun wasn’t besmirching my virtue, right?”

Wangji looked reproachfully at Wei Ying as Wen Ning spluttered.

“Uh – um – he –”

“We will come for dinner,” said Lan Wangji calmly, reaching up to gently pull Wei Ying’s arms away from his neck.

Wei Ying’s protest died as Wangji took his hand instead, and then he sighed dramatically, rolling his eyes. “Fine, let’s go.”

“I’m sorry, gongzi,” Wen Ning began, but Wei Ying clamped a hand on his shoulder.

“Don’t be! I’d do the same to Jiang Cheng if I was him.”

“You would not,” said Wangji, and Wei Ying looked at him. “You would go to spy on him yourself. You are shameless.”

Wei Ying laughed. “Ah, that’s true. Wen Ning, do you know what’s for dinner?”

Wangji let the chatter was over him as they made their way back to Wei Ying’s bedrooms. He wondered briefly why Jiang Wanyin hadn’t come himself – he certainly seemed to enjoy loudly and scathingly proclaiming Wei Ying’s shamelessness. When he did, though, Wei Ying would beam as though his brother was showering him with compliments rather than insults, and slowly, Wangji was coming to realise this *was* how Jiang Wanyin showed affection. That when Jinling proclaimed that threatening to break your legs was Jiang Wanyin’s way of saying ‘I love you,’ he meant it.

Now, if he looked at Jiang Wanyin, Wangji no longer felt suspicious or angry about what he may have done in the future that was gone. It was hard to when he could see how hard Jiang Wanyin was trying. He would grumble about not being a servant while bringing Wei Ying his favourite foods, and he would spend time talking and playing board games with the bed-bound time travellers for as long as he could. And every day he played with A-Yuan, and snuck him candies far too close to mealtimes, and slipped him almost as many presents as Wangji himself had bought in Yiling. It was almost impossible to think badly of Jiang Wanyin after seeing how good of an uncle he was.

And Wangji had discovered that he didn’t want to think badly of Jiang Wanyin anymore after seeing how brightly his face lit up the first time A-Yuan called out, “Cheng-shushu, I’ll break your legs!”

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For Jinling, the calm that settled around him in the days after the rescue was almost jarring.

It felt like he had been running since the Guanyin Temple, desperate and frantic as disaster after disaster crashed down around him, but now he had finally stopped, exhausted and aching and breathless.

He’d stopped.

He kept waiting for something else to go wrong, for Lotus Pier to be attacked, or for someone to go missing, or for someone’s injuries to get infected, but nothing happened.



Instead, he began to heal. His hip, arm, and throat all hurt fiercely still, and he knew they were likely to for a while, but after the first day, Wen Qing gave him permission to use crutches, which was far faster than he'd expected. It was hard not to be disappointed when his father left for Jinlintai, but he had his mother and Jiujiu, and he had Wei Wuxian and Sizhui, Jingyi, and Zizhen. He was far from alone.

In fact, Jinling slowly came to realise that he'd never felt less alone in his life.

For the first few days, he spent most of his time in Wei Wuxian's rooms with Sizhui, Jingyi, and Zizhen, just talking or playing board games, or even just sitting together, reading and drawing in comfortable silence. They also spent a lot of time entertaining A-Yuan and A-Yu, and sometimes Mo Xuanyu too. Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji were almost always there, though Wei Wuxian spent a fair bit of time squirrelled away in the corner pouring over books and texts and making copious notes.

After a week, Wen Qing said that it would be alright for Sizhui to move around a little more, so Jinling was able to show his friends his favourite parts of Lotus Pier. It was a little cold, being winter, but comfortable, and it was a nice change to sit outside for once, rather than stay in Wei Wuxian's rooms. Around them, some people were still busy – the Lan elders had left to fly back to Gusu, though Jingyi's family was staying, and the guest rooms they'd stayed in were immediately tidied to allow the Wen a little more space. Jiujiu and Jianyu were busy making plans to build the Wen a village of their own, and Wei Wuxian helped a lot of the time, when he wasn't reading up on the Nie sect, or playing Weiqi and telling stories with Jinling and the others.

But for Jinling, Sizhui, Jingyi, and Zizhen, the days passed slowly, and lazily. Their wounds gradually continued to heal, and the days were peaceful, and enjoyable, even fun, and Jinling was truly grateful for them.

But the nights...

The nights were very different.

Because every night, from the moment Jinling shut his eyes, the nightmares came for him. They were vivid, and bright, and within them he had full awareness of his body, he could feel everything that was happening – and so most of the time, he had no idea he was dreaming. Every night, Jinling would believe that he was awake as his mind played out things far worse than he could have imagined while awake.

He dreamt that he was tied to a tree, watching as Xue Yang tortured Zizhen until there was no more blood to spill from his body, until his screaming and begging had been strangled away into silence, until his eyes were dull and empty and dead. He dreamt of running into the dungeon Jin Guangyao had kept him in, seeing Jingyi chained to the wall, his eyes wide open, his neck cut so deeply Jinling could see the bone. He dreamt of Sizhui, begging brokenly as Su She stabbed him again and again and again, of the blade stabbing into Jinling's own stomach when he tried to stop it with a flash of searing pain.

Other nights, he dreamt of Jin Guangyao stabbing his father, strangling his mother, he dreamt of Jiujiu bleeding out beneath a mountain of stone before Jinling could get to him, he dreamt

of his own hand driving his own sword through Wei Wuxian's heart, his uncle's eyes growing wide with shock and pain before they went dark and dull forever.

Every night, Jinling woke up gasping and sweating, cringing alone in the bedroom he currently shared with Zizhen. He could only be grateful that he didn't wake screaming – the last thing he wanted was for Zizhen or his mother to wake.

As much as Jinling craved comfort, he didn't want anyone to know. It wasn't like Jinling didn't know *why* he was having nightmares, and the last thing he wanted to do when they were over was talk about them and live through them again.

Instead, he would lie in the dark, and meditate until sleep tugged him back down into the dreams that wanted to eat him whole.

During the day, it was easier to pretend there was nothing wrong, but as time wore on it grew more difficult. Jinling was able to stave off full-on exhaustion – his golden core never seemed to suffer from the nightmares, and he was able to draw on its energy to keep himself awake during the day. Wen Qing was monitoring all the time-traveller's spiritual energy closely, but she didn't say that there was anything wrong. So, he was okay – he was fine. The nightmares couldn't last forever. He was fine.

He was just so, so tired.

Nearly two weeks after the rescue, he was sitting on the end of a pier with the others, watching the water with a wondering mind as the others chattered.

“Hey, Jinling!” Jingyi called, and Jinling jumped, looking at him –

And he saw Xue Yang's face smirking at him, and Jinling yelped, leaping back –

And he tumbled down, and crashed down into the frigid water of the lake, and as the water closed over his head Jinling's lungs seized up, and Jinling could feel Xue Yang's hands around his neck, crushing his throat, and he flailed frantically. But Jinling had been raised as much in Lotus Pier as he had in Lanling, and even as he flailed his body moved on instinct, pushing him towards the surface. In the same moment his head broke the surface a hand shot down towards him, its nails scraping the back of his neck as the hand closed around his collar, yanking him out of the water and back up onto the pier.

“Jinling! Jinling!” There was a clamour of voices calling his name, and as he coughed and spluttered he felt the hand that had wrenched him out ease him onto his side, rubbing his shoulder gently.

“It's okay,” Wei Wuxian's voice said, “it's okay, A-Ling, you're okay.”

“What the hell was that?” asked Jingyi, his voice too tight, too afraid, and Jinling looked at him quickly. It was Jingyi – his face still black and blue with bruises, but unmistakably Jingyi. Coughing, Jinling sat himself up and scanned the area, but Xue Yang wasn't there.

His dreams were bleeding into the daytime, too. Jinling wanted to cry.

“A-Ling,” said Wei Wuxian gently, and Jinling looked at him. There was concern in the man’s eyes, and Jinling sniffed, wiping his sopping sleeve across his nose. “Are you okay?”

“Fine,” Jinling choked. “Just made me jump, th-that’s all.”

“You don’t say,” muttered Wei Wuxian, and Jinling glared at him. His uncle gave a wry smile, and then scooped Jinling clean up off the floor, ignoring his protests. “Right, you need a warm bath, a change of clothes, and lots of soup. Let’s go see Shijie.”

Jinling offered a few grumbled token protests, but he was too tired to put up a proper fight as Wei Wuxian carried him back to his room, putting him down and wrapping him up in a blanket while he set about drawing a bath.

Before he knew it, Jinling was back in bed, warm and comfortable and far too close to sleep for his own liking. Luckily, before he could doze off, his mother came in with soup, placing the bowl in his hands and sitting on the edge of his bed, stroking his still-damp hair away from his forehead.

“A-Ling,” she said gently. “Is everything okay?”

The urge to tell her rose as a lump in Jinling’s throat, but he couldn’t stand to relive what he’d seen in his dreams, and if he said he was having nightmares his mother would surely ask what they were. So, instead of speaking, he nodded – perhaps a little too fervently – and took a huge spoonful of soup.

A-Niang gave a small, sad smile, shaking her head slightly and stroking Jinling’s hair. “You’re so much like A-Cheng.”

Jinling’s heart warmed slightly, and he smiled.

His mother smiled back. “I know if nothing is wrong you won’t necessarily feel the need to stay in bed, but how about we have a quiet day here together, hm? Just you and me.”

Jinling nodded eagerly. “I’d like that.” He paused, frowning slightly. “Where’s Rulan?”

“With Xianxian,” said Jiang Yanli. “He’s just been fed, so he’ll be fine for a good while.”

Jinling couldn’t help but preen a little. He didn’t mind sharing his parents with Rulan – at first, it had been easy to feel resent for the baby for having what he’d never had a chance to get, but it had never been something Jinling had thought consciously. None of this was the baby’s fault. He was actually pretty cute, too, and not nearly as fussy as he would have expected his baby self to be. As long as he was in someone’s arms, he was happy just to watch what was going on.

Even so, spending time alone with A-Niang somehow felt more precious.

They spoke about everything, and about nothing, and soon Jinling had forgotten his nightmares altogether. His mother, he was learning, was funny, and she told so many stories about growing up with Jiujiu and Wei Wuxian that he almost felt he’d fallen further back in time to see it himself. It was wonderful, and they had three full hours of it before Wei Wuxian

showed up to knock at the door with a wailing Rulan in his arms, and A-Yuan attached to his leg.

“Ling-gege!” cried A-Yuan, hurtling across the room to fling himself against the bed. “Are you feeling better? Are you warm now?”

Jinling smiled and nodded, and A-Yuan beamed at him, scrambling up into the bed beside him.

“Good! You shouldn’t do that again, though, Ling-gege, A-Die says it’s dangerous to go into the water when it’s cold.”

Jinling couldn’t help but roll his eyes. “I didn’t do it on purpose.”

“A-Yuan!” Wei Wuxian called, winking at Jinling as he did. He and A-Niang had been talking quickly and quietly, and now he held out his hand for A-Yuan. “We’re going to let Ling-gege have more time with his A-Niang. Come on.”

“Okay!” A-Yuan sang, planting a clumsy kiss on Jinling’s cheek, before hurtling out of the bed and racing back to Wei Wuxian’s side.

“I’d feed him too if I could, Shijie, but alas, I’m ill-equipped,” said Wei Wuxian, and A-Niang smiled fondly, patting Wei Wuxian’s cheek.

“I know, Xianxian. We’ll see you later.”

Wei Wuxian nodded, and left the room, and Jinling’s mother walked back to perch on the side of the bed. Wailing as though his heart was breaking, Rulan flailed his little arms, and A-Niang clucked her tongue.

“There, there, baby,” she soothed. “It’s alright, just be patient...”

Somehow, the baby wailed even louder, and Jinling winced slightly.

“Well, it’s good to know I’ve *never* had any patience,” he muttered, and his mother laughed, looking fondly at him as she adjusted herself, and raised Rulan to her breast. The baby stopped crying so abruptly that Jinling snorted, and his mother settled a scarf over herself and turned back to him.

“Now,” she said, “Where were we?”

“You were talking about Jiujiu teaching Wei Wuxian how to swim,” he said, and A-Niang smiled.

“Ah, yes. He was not a good teacher – I think Xianxian swallowed half the lake...” She shook her head fondly.

They spent the rest of the day together, just Jinling and Rulan and A-Niang, and when he fell asleep, he was so calm and happy he forgot to be afraid of the nightmares.

*He was in his own bed – his own bed, in his own room, in Jinlintai, and Fairy was asleep on his legs, and for some reason that was wrong. Jinling couldn't remember why, but he was frowning as the door opened, and Xiao-shushu walked inside, a small smile on his face.*

*"A-Ling. You're awake," he said, and for some reason fear crawled up Jinling's throat. He couldn't remember why, what was wrong – this was Xiao-shushu, who loved him, who looked after him, so he asked,*

*"What's going on?"*

*Xiao-shushu's smile grew more wan. "Ah, A-Ling... Now that you're eighteen –" When did he turn eighteen?! "the elders believe that it is only right that you should take your place as Jin-zongzhu."*

*"What?" Jinling yelled. He didn't understand what was going on, why the elders would suggest such a thing when Xiao-shushu had been Jin-zongzhu for years, why Xiao-shushu said he was eighteen, why he was so afraid – why Fairy was still sleeping, when Jinling had just yelled. "I can't!"*

*"Don't worry, A-Ling," soothed Xiao-shushu, gently lying Jinling back down. "You won't ever have to be ready." He smiled, and Jinling smiled back.*

*And then Xiao-shushu pressed a pillow against Jinling's face, and held it tight over his nose and mouth.*

*Panic flooded through him, and Jinling tried to fight or even flail, but his body wouldn't move, and Fairy didn't wake up, and Xiao-shushu pressed the pillow tighter, and Jinling couldn't breathe –*

*His head began to spin, and his lungs screamed, but there was nothing he could do as Xiao-shushu smothered him, as Xiao-shushu murdered him, and he gasped but no air hit his lungs and –*

*Jinling gasped, jolting so violently his whole bed shook. He was covered in sweat, his hair clinging to his face as he shivered, and he gulped down breath after desperate breath. He heard Zizhen groan and turn over in his sleep, and Jinling clamped his hand over his mouth to keep quiet – but then panic shot through him and he let go, drawing in another breath from his mouth.*

*He could breathe. It was okay. He was okay.*

*Tears stung at his eyes.*

*He wanted Fairy. He'd missed her fiercely ever since they got here, and by now he missed her so much it hurt. If she really had been lying on the end of Jinling's bed, the nightmares wouldn't have been able to get him – or at least if they did, she'd help to calm him down.*

*But she wasn't here.*

He didn't sleep again that night. He didn't even dare to meditate. Instead, he lay awake in bed, running over sword forms in his mind, pinching his arms every time his eyelids started to flutter. By the time Zizhen yawned awake in the morning, Jinling's arms were black and blue, but they were also hidden beneath his sleeves, so it didn't matter.

Nothing seemed to matter that day – or it mattered too much. Jinling was so tired that everything was getting under his skin – his crutches were cumbersome, and Jingyi was too loud, and the teasing was *obviously* more pointed than usual, and it was too cold, and everyone kept asking if he was okay and sending horrible, worried looks at him if he sounded too snappish. Irritation boiled under his skin all day, and he *knew* that it was because he was tired, but knowing didn't matter.

So, when the messenger butterfly came from his father, Jinling was already in a foul mood. The fact that the butterfly from *his* father addressed Hanguang Jun rather than Jinling made it worse.

Then, Lan Wangji turned to look at the rest of the room – the usual crowd of Wei Wuxian, Jinling, Jingyi, Sizhui, Zizhen, and A-Yuan. His eyes lingered on A-Yuan, and he cleared his throat.

“Jin Zixuan and Nie Huaisang have found nearly ten women so far. Two are confirmed to have died in the service of their – houses. So far, they have found three children. But the man who ran the orphanage... he claimed that two others were in such poor condition when they arrived the doctors could do nothing for them.”

Jinling stared at A-Yuan, and fury burnt in his heart. A-Yuan was a *baby*, and he was the last one left because Lanling Jin had done evil things, and Jinling was so furious that it hurt –

It really hurt.

It was burning.

Jinling's chest was burning.

He gasped in a breath, and his throat screamed as though he had sucked down poison. Within him, the heat concentrated down into his gut, into his core, so hot it was like a forge had been lit in his stomach, and he tasted blood in his mouth –

And then it felt like something exploded within him, fire and shrapnel cutting through him from the inside, and all Jinling could do was scream.

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! I hope that you enjoyed this chapter, please do let me know what you thought! I love hearing from you! Until next time, please take care!



# Chapter 44

## Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for all the lovely comments for the last chapter! I really appreciate your ongoing support for this monster of a fic.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

All morning, Wei Wuxian had suspected that there was something wrong with Jinling. He looked exhausted, and irritation was constantly dancing in his eyes. From his experience living with Jiang Cheng, Wei Wuxian knew that asking what was wrong was unlikely to help. The quickest way to get Jiang Cheng to express his feelings was to rile him into anger, but there was a vulnerability to Jinling that made Wei Wuxian suspect that was a bad idea, so his plan was to take a little walk with Jinling after lunch, and maybe throw some rocks into the lake.

At least, that *had* been Wei Wuxian's plan.

And then Jinling started screaming, and his eyes rolled up into his skull, and all of Wei Wuxian's plans flew out of the window. He dove for his nephew, catching Jinling before he could slide off the edge of the bed, but he jerked and spasmed in Wei Wuxian's arms, screaming like someone was ripping out his heart.

"A-Ling!" Wei Wuxian cried, rationality sharpening his voice even as panic shot through his veins like poison. "Lan Zhan, go get Wen Qing, now, run!" Lan Zhan had sprinted from the room before Wei Wuxian even finished asking, and Wei Wuxian jogged his nephew in his arms. "A-Ling, can you hear me? A-Ling!"

For a second, Jinling's screams cut off, but only so that he could cough up a spray of blood, and then he started shrieking again, his entire body shuddering and spasming so violently Wei Wuxian could hardly keep a hold of him.

"A-Die, A-Die, what's happening?" sobbed A-Yuan, and *shit*, A-Yuan was here, A-Yuan was watching, and he sounded terrified. "What's wrong with him?"

"He's going to be fine," Wei Wuxian said, forcing as much calm into his voice as he could manage. It wasn't very much. "A-Yuan, I need you to stay calm."

"C-c'mere," said Zizhen, holding out his arms, and A-Yuan scrambled quickly up into his lap, wrapping his arms around Zizhen's neck and cringing into his chest. The fear on the faces of both boys were identical, and their eyes were still fixed on Jinling.

"He – he – he – qi deviation?" stuttered Jingyi fearfully, clutching at Sizhui's hand, and Wei Wuxian pursed his lips tight. He didn't know what else it could be, but Jinling was young, so



young, and Wei Wuxian didn't know what to *do* –

“It's okay,” Wei Wuxian said, his voice trembling slightly, “it's okay, A-Ling, you're okay, we're here.”

“A-Die,” A-Yuan whined fearfully, and in that moment tears of blood began bleeding from Jinling's eyes, and A-Yuan burst into tears. Out of the corner of his eye, Wei Wuxian saw Zizhen hug A-Yuan tight to his chest, hiding his face, and his son's cries became muffled, and Wei Wuxian swallowed.

“A-Ling,” he said, stroking Jinling's hair back from his forehead. “A-Ling, you're alright, we're here –”

A sound began to splutter through Jinling's shrieks, until at last his stuttering screams became words. “*J-J-Jiujiu! Jiujiu!*”

Biting back a sob, Wei Wuxian hugged Jinling closer. “Hang on, A-Ling, hang on -” throwing back his head, Wei Wuxian bellowed as loudly as he could, “Jiang Cheng!” If his brother wasn't within hearing distance, anyone who heard would know to go and get him, but it wasn't fast enough –

Bright red tears were streaking down A-Ling's face, and he started to wail, a heart-wrenching sound of terror and anguish. “Jiujiu! Jiujiu! H-help me, Jiujiu *help me, please!*”

“He's coming,” Wei Wuxian promised, tears stinging his own eyes, “Jiujiu's coming, Jiujiu's coming –”

But then Jinling looked up at him, and his eyes bulged, fresh blood spilling from them as he choked and shook his head, trying desperately to scramble out of Wei Wuxian's arms. “No! No, *please*, don't – Jiujiu! *Jiujiu!*”

His fist hit Wei Wuxian in the jaw, and it was the shock more than the pain that made Wei Wuxian release his hold on his nephew, watching in terror as Jinling pushed himself across the floor, shaking his head frantically. His eyes were scanning over all over them, and he was still trembling and spasming, the jerking movements bashing his head against the wall as he backed into it.

“No!” he wailed, covering his face with his arms and cringing away from them, and Wei Wuxian's heart stoppered his throat. “No, *please, please* – Jiujiu, Jiujiu help me! *Jiujiu!*”

At that moment, Jiang Cheng skidded through the door, Wen Qing and Lan Zhan right behind him.

“A-Ling!” Jiang Cheng cried, his face a picture of pure horror as he looked at Wei Wuxian. “What the hell is going on?”

“N-no! *Jiujiu!*” Jinling wailed, and then he gave a horrible, strangled gasp. His entire body jolted as though he'd been whipped with Zidian – blood spilt down his chin, and Jinling slumped down to the floor, and a cry ripped from Wei Wuxian's throat –

And Wen Qing flew past him, landing beside Jinling and grabbing his wrist. He gave another awful, gurgling gasp and tried to pull away, but Wen Qing didn't let him. Her back was to Wei Wuxian, blocking most of what she was doing from view, but he could see her arms moving as fast as a butterfly's wings, and he tried to draw in a breath of his own.

Vaguely, he was aware of Jiang Cheng appearing at his side, trembling as he stared down at their nephew, and then Lan Zhan was there too, taking a hysterical A-Yuan from Zizhen's arms. Wordlessly, Lan Zhan ushered Zizhen, Sizhui, and Jingyi from the room, A-Yuan howling into his shoulder.

He left an eerie quiet in his wake, and suddenly – too suddenly – Wei Wuxian realised that Jinling wasn't screaming anymore. Instead, he was struggling to breathe, his breath rattling in his lungs and hissing through his teeth, and Wei Wuxian shook his head slightly. He didn't understand, couldn't understand –

"Wei Wuxian, Jiang-zongzhu, help me get him onto the bed," Wen Qing ordered, and Wei Wuxian pushed himself to his feet, hurrying to her side. Jinling's eyes were closed, now, but he could see them roving frantically beneath his eyelids, and when he scooped his nephew off the floor, his skin was searing hot.

"J-J-Jiujiu," he whimpered, his head lolling back over Wei Wuxian's arm. "Jiujiu..."

"On the bed, quickly!" Wen Qing said, and Wei Wuxian lay Jinling down, taking one of his hands tightly. Jiang Cheng vaulted over the bed to kneel at the other side, taking Jinling's other hand.

"I'm here, A-Ling," Jiang Cheng promised, his trembling voice breaking when he glanced at Wei Wuxian. "I'm here, Jiujiu's here, I –"

"No," Jinling begged, his head shaking, neck straining, "no! Please, don't, Jiujiu – don't – don't – Jiujiu, *Jiujiu!*"

"Don't what?" Jiang Cheng begged back, but Wen Qing shook her head.

"He can't hear you," she said sharply, inserting a needle into Jinling's neck. "He's in the middle of a qi deviation, and not a mild one."

"What?" cried Jiang Cheng, looking frantically up at her. "You said – you said there was no sign of it, you said –"

"Jiang Cheng!"

"There wasn't," said Wen Qing grimly, ignoring Wei Wuxian's protest on her behalf. "Be quiet. I need to work."

Jiang Cheng fell silent, a tear trailing down his stone-white cheek as he looked down at Jinling. Wei Wuxian took a deep breath, trying to calm his own racing heart. There was blood on Jinling's sleeve. It looked like he must have pulled open the still healing wound there, and Wei Wuxian's eyes stung sharply.

Slowly, Jinling's whimpering became weaker, and the words of his broken begging blurred out of recognition, until all Wei Wuxian could hear were tiny, desperate whines like the mewl of a new-born kitten. Frightened. Begging. Desperate.

Helpless.

"A-Ling!" came a gasp from the door, and Wei Wuxian looked up. Shijie was standing there, wide-eyed and ashen faced, and without a second's hesitation, she ran across the room. She crashed to her knees beside Wei Wuxian, less gracefully and more forcefully than he had ever seen her move before, and she looked at him with awful, terrified questioning in her eyes.

"We don't know – Wen Qing's working, we – he can't hear us," Wei Wuxian stammered, and Yanli swallowed and nodded, reaching out and clutching Wei Wuxian and Jinling's entwined hands in her own. She pressed herself against Wei Wuxian's side, making herself as small as possible so as not to get in the way, and Wen Qing continued working.

Then, Jinling drew in a sharp breath.

Stopped shivering.

Fell limp.

"Wen Qing," Wei Wuxian choked, but she shook her head, not taking her eyes away from Jinling as she worked.

"He's alive. Trust me."

Wei Wuxian swallowed, and beside him he heard Yanli choke back a sob. He trusted Wen Qing as completely as he did Lan Zhan and Shijie, but he knew her as well as he knew them too. He could hear the worry in her voice, could see the confusion in the pinch of her eyes.

Wen Qing didn't know if Jinling would be alright.

Taking a deep, shuddering breath, Wei Wuxian bowed his head, pressing his forehead to their entangled hands, and prayed.

Time passed strangely, somehow seeming to race and drag simultaneously, and he felt like he was trapped in a whirling river, caught between the eddies. Eventually, though, he heard Wen Qing gasp sharply, and he looked up. Her eyes were wide, something like realisation in them, and then her hand snapped out, grabbing Jiang Cheng's wrist. She pressed her fingers to his pulse point for a long moment, and then whispered something Wei Wuxian couldn't catch.

Then, she turned her attention back to Jinling, the shifting needles and pouring a thin stream of spiritual energy into his wrist. He was sure she was doing more, too, things he didn't understand, and he took a deep breath, putting his arm around Yanli's shoulder and pulling her close. She was shivering lightly, and she nestled closer, resting her cheek on his shoulder.

Eventually, Wen Qing moved away from Jinling and opened her medicine box, pulling out a small kettle and stove. She brewed some bitter-smelling tea, and then Wen Qing removed three needles from Jinling's head. Then she drew back and let out a long breath.

“I think,” she said carefully, “I think he is stable.”

“Will he be okay?” asked Shijie, her voice trembling, and Wen Qing swallowed, glancing apologetically at her.

“I can’t know until he wakes up,” she said softly, glancing back down at Jinling. “If – if he wakes up and is lucid in the next few minutes, I have every hope he will be, but... I think I know what happened, but preventing it from happening again will take some work...”

Jiang Cheng gave a strangled little sob, and Wei Wuxian closed his eyes, taking a deep breath.

“Thank you, Wen-guniang,” Yanli whispered.

Jinling’s fingers twitched against Wei Wuxian’s, and Wei Wuxian looked up at him sharply.

“A-Ling?” asked Jiang Cheng tightly, and Jinling frowned slightly, shifting uncomfortably.

Slowly, he blinked open hazy eyes, looking over the four people gathered around him. It took his eyes a moment to focus, and then he turned his head towards Jiang Cheng, swallowing.

“Jiujiu...” he croaked. “What... what’s going on?”

“What is the last thing you remember?” asked Wen Qing gently, and Jinling looked at her, confusion and fear flickering in his eyes.

“I... there was a message from A-Die,” he said uncertainly, his voice trembling a little. “Then... Then everything hurt...”

Wen Qing nodded slightly. “Do you know where you are?”

“Home,” Jinling said, his voice breaking. With what looked like great effort, he turned his head towards Wei Wuxian and Yanli. “Your... your rooms.”

“That’s right,” said Wei Wuxian, smiling as best he could.

“You had a qi deviation,” Wen Qing explained, and Jinling’s eyes widened. “It was quite serious.”

“What?” Jinling whispered, his eyes flickering fearfully between the four of them. “H-how?”

“I think I know,” said Wen Qing, “but I need you to stay calm, Jinling. Take a deep breath for me.”

Jinling obeyed shakily, and he gripped Wei Wuxian’s hand. A ripple of relief ran through him, and Wei Wuxian swallowed. As horrible as this was, it was at least better than Jinling trying desperately to get away from him.

“That’s it,” said Wen Qing soothingly. “That’s it. Here.” She passed a cup of the tea to Jinling, and Jiang Cheng helped their nephew sit up slightly. “Drink this.” Jinling took the cup

in trembling hands and raised it to his lips, draining it. Wen Qing nodded, and took the cup back. “I think I know why it happened, and why you, Sizhui, Jingyi, and Zizhen all have so much spiritual energy.”

The words struck Wei Wuxian in the gut and he sucked in a deep breath. The only thing worse than this happening to Jinling was this happening to the others, too.

“At first, I thought the energy was residual from the spell, but that’s not it – not exactly. Wei Wuxian, when you were talking about the ritual, you said that it is the life of the caster that sends back the person, and the core of the caster that sends back their core.” Wei Wuxian nodded, and Wen Qing continued. “I believe that the cores of the spell casters did not *send* the boys’ cores back – it’s more like they carried them.”

“What are you talking about?” asked Jiang Cheng, and Wen Qing pursed her lips.

“The reason Jinling has so much spiritual energy is that he currently has two cores. There is his own, but there is also a fragment of Jiang Cheng’s core within him as well. It’s so small that I couldn’t sense it until I thought to look for it, but it’s certainly there. It’s far too small to function as a core on its own, but it is enough to cultivate energy, which is why there’s far too much in your body. Up until now you’ve all been exhausted and wounded, so that energy has been channelled automatically into healing, but now that you’re getting better the lack of balance is becoming an issue.”

“Can you fix it?” asked Jiang Cheng at once. “Wen-guniang, can you fix it?”

“I will certainly try,” said Wen Qing, nodding slightly. “I’ll have to do more research, but it *should* be possible to remove it surgically, without affecting Jinling’s own core.”

Jinling gave a sharp gasp, his grip on Wei Wuxian’s fingers growing crushingly tight, but though his eyes were wide, it didn’t look like it was fear that had widened them. “Wen-guniang, could – could you give it to Wei Wuxian?” Wei Wuxian froze, and Wen Qing frowned, but Jinling continued eagerly. “The tiny core, could – could it help Wei Wuxian?”

“No!” Wei Wuxian bit out, the moment he could make his voice work. “No, absolutely not!”

Jinling frowned. “Why not?”

“Because you’d have to be awake for the procedure and that’s not happening,” Wei Wuxian snapped, but it was a mistake, because Jiang Cheng made a sound like a wounded animal.

“Awake? You were awake?”

Fuck.

“It doesn’t matter,” said Wei Wuxian sharply. “It’s not happening!”

“It does matter!” Jiang Cheng fired back, his voice beginning to raise into a shout, but Yanli rose from her knees to sit on the edge of Jinling’s bed, and she looked between the two of them.

“That’s enough,” she said firmly. “This isn’t helping. A-Cheng, it does matter, but now is not the time to talk about it. A-Xian, calm down and let Wen-guniang answer the question.”

“There’s no way-”

“A-Xian,” said Shijie sharply, and Wei Wuxian clenched his jaw, glaring at Wen Qing.

As usual, she was unfazed by his glare, and she smiled sadly as she looked at Jinling. “I don’t think so. As I said, it is merely a fragment of the size of a normal golden core. On its own, it wouldn’t work.”

Relief washed over Wei Wuxian, almost strong enough to hide the flutter of disappointment he tried so hard not to feel.

Jinling pursed his lips, looking at Wei Wuxian for a long moment, before looking back to Wen Qing. “Okay... but you said that it’s probably the same for the others. What if you combined them?”

“Absolutely not –” Wei Wuxian growled, and to his horror, Wen Qing was frowning as though she was considering it. “No! That’s not going to happen, that’s *never* going to happen, you are *never* going to go through that to-”

“It needs to be taken out anyway!” Jinling protested, and panic raised Wei Wuxian’s voice into a shout.

“It’s not going to happen!”

“You’re not the only one who has a say! Don’t you think we’d rather be in pain for a few hours and let you have a golden core than know we wouldn’t try-”

“There’s no way in hell –”

“Wei Wuxian!” said Wen Qing sharply. “That’s enough! Jinling, stop shouting, now – you need to calm down. I’ve stabilised your core for now but if you get angry you could fall back into qi deviation. So stop, both of you, and take a deep breath. *Now.*”

The thought that Jinling could qi deviate again sent terror crashing over Wei Wuxian in a cold wave, knocking the air from his lungs, and he closed his eyes, flinching away.

“I won’t even consider any sort of transfer until I’ve studied all four of you, and done a lot more research,” said Wen Qing, holding up her hand to stop Wei Wuxian from speaking. “However, theoretically... theoretically, *if* there were away for the four fragments to be combined, and *if* they did not reject each other’s spiritual energy, there *might* be away to create a new core for Wei Wuxian.”

“No,” Wei Wuxian choked. “You’re not doing that to them for me. You can’t. You can’t.”

“I won’t do anything that will cause anyone any further harm,” promised Wen Qing. “But removing the fragment of a foreign core should be simpler than removing the entirety of a person’s own core.” Clearly catching the look on Wei Wuxian’s face, Wen Qing turned to

him. “If the only way to transfer the core fragments to you is through a surgery like the one you suffered through, I will not do it. But there’s a chance we can find a way to make this work, Wuxian, without hurting them that badly, and I would not forgive myself if I didn’t at least try to research it.”

“No.” Wei Wuxian’s voice broke. “No, Wen Qing – there’s no time, there’s – it could happen again, at any time and they – they need you to fix them now, we can’t waste time with, with \_”

“I can’t fix them without knowing how,” said Wen Qing, her voice horribly gentle. “Wei Wuxian, I’m only asking for a few days. In the meantime, there are medicines I can give all three of them to stave off some of the effects, and perhaps Hanguang Jun will play for them.”

“I think it is for the best, A-Xian,” said Yanli quietly. “We should at least know all of our options before we commit to a path.”

“You’re only saying that because you don’t know what it feels like,” said Wei Wuxian, turning his face away. “If you did there’s no way in hell you would let this happen.”

“Xianxian, Wen Qing has already said she won’t do that surgery. Not the way it happened to you.” Yanli reached over stroking his hair from his face. “Why don’t you go and get some air? Let the others know that Jinling is going to be okay?”

“I think that’s a good idea,” said Wen Qing, and Wei Wuxian stared at Jinling.

He looked so small lying there on the bed, blood still on his face, needles still sticking out of his arms, but there was a stubbornness in his eyes that scared the life out of Wei Wuxian.

“Fine,” Wei Wuxian said quietly, standing up.

He made his way outside, and had barely made it three steps from the door when Lan Zhan appeared in front of him, A-Yuan on his hip, and Rulan tucked into his other arm. The smaller of the two was crying half-heartedly as Lan Zhan jogged him up and down, but though A-Yuan’s cheeks were still red and sticky from tears, his crying had stopped. At once, he reached out his little hands to Wei Wuxian who took him gratefully, cuddling him close.

“How is it going?” Lan Zhan asked, his voice low with worry, and Wei Wuxian had to swallow three times before he could speak.

“He’s okay,” he said, shaking his head slightly. “He – Wen Qing says he’ll be okay, but... they want... he wants –” The words got stuck in his throat and he shuddered, squeezing his eyes shut.

It would kill him. If his son and his nephew and his Jingyi and his Zizhen went through that agony for his sake, if they ripped themselves apart to put him back together, the guilt of it would kill him. He knew it would. Why wouldn’t it? How couldn’t it?

“A-Die?” asked A-Yuan tremulously, tugging at Wei Wuxian’s hair. “Is – is Ling-gege very sick?”

Wei Wuxian shook his head, but his lips were trembling, and he heard A-Yuan whine quietly.

“A-Die, what’s wrong?” And he sounded scared, A-Yuan sounded so scared –

And then there was an arm winding around Wei Wuxian, A-Yuan and all, and he let himself crumple against Lan Zhan’s shoulder, burying his face in the soft sandalwood scent of his robes. Lan Zhan rubbed his back, and Wei Wuxian shuddered. Now somewhat sandwiched between them, Rulan began to fuss with more earnest, and Lan Zhan somehow managed to jog him up and down without moving away from Wei Wuxian.

“A-Die...” A-Yuan whispered, and Wei Wuxian swallowed, hugging his son closer.

“It’s okay. Ling-gege’s going to be okay,” he promised. “A-Die just got a bit surprised, that’s all.” He leant closer to Lan Zhan, and then tried to joke. “Did, did Shijie just throw the baby at you on her way in?”

“She did not throw him,” chided Lan Zhan gently. “But she did pass him to me on her way in.” He hesitated. “Wei Ying... Jinling...”

Wei Wuxian took a deep breath and pulled away, explaining everything to Lan Zhan as best he could while A-Yuan stroked clumsily at his hair. Perhaps he should have waited until A-Yuan wasn’t there, or until the other time-travellers were, but he couldn’t help it. The words tumbled out of him brokenly, and to his horror Lan Zhan looked almost considering by the time he finished.

“They *can’t*,” Wei Wuxian stressed, grabbing his hand. “Lan Zhan, you of all people know how much it hurts, they *can’t* go through that for me, they can’t!”

“No, they cannot,” said Lan Zhan firmly, and relief weakened Wei Wuxian’s knees, until he added, “but Wen Qing said it would be a different surgery. Wei Ying, no one is going to do anything to cause any of them harm. You know that.”

Wei Wuxian’s lower lip trembled. “Who says I want a cobbled together mix of Jiang Cheng and Huaisang and Zewu Jun inside me?”

“Who says it is even possible?” countered Lan Zhan, putting a hand on the side of Wei Wuxian’s face. Looking worriedly between the two of them, A-Yuan then copied the gesture, resting his palm against Wei Wuxian’s other cheek. Despite everything, his heart rose a little. “Wei Ying, we know little, now. If it is not possible, Wen Qing will not try. If it will cause trauma or harm to the others, she will not try. But if it is possible, Wei Ying... you could wield Suibian again. You could stop using demonic cultivation...” Lan Zhan paused, the tips of his ears going a little red even as he met Wei Wuxian’s eyes. “In the Burial Mounds, you said that you could not be with me forever. But if this is possible... Wei Ying, there is no reason why you couldn’t.”

“Don’t cry, A-Die,” said A-Yuan softly, wiping at the tears escaping Wei Wuxian’s eyes. “Don’t cry.”



Wei Wuxian sniffed, wiping his sleeve across his face and smiling at A-Yuan as best he could. “Ah, you’re right, little radish, you’re right. That just gave us all a bit of a fright, didn’t it?”

A-Yuan nodded seriously. “But Ling-gege’s going to be okay?”

Wei Wuxian nodded, praying it would remain true. “Ling-gege’s going to be okay.”

“Can I give him a butterfly?” A-Yuan asked, holding up one of his most battered, beloved grass butterflies. “To make him feel better?”

“Of course,” said Wei Wuxian. “But he needs to rest right now. How about we go find Sizhui, Jingyi, and Zizhen to let them know that he’s going to be okay?”

A-Yuan nodded, and Wei Wuxian pressed a kiss to his cheek, glancing at Lan Zhan. Rulan’s fussing had slowed, because Lan Zhan was now cradling him in his arms and rocking him back and forth gently, and the baby was grabbing at Lan Zhan’s hair. As Wei Wuxian watched, Rulan put his fist into his mouth, and Lan Zhan smiled a sort of smile Wei Wuxian had never seen before.

It was, quite possibly, one of the loveliest things Wei Wuxian had ever seen.

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! I hope that you enjoyed it, please do let me know what you thought if you're so inclined! Until next time, please do take care!

# Chapter 45

## Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for all your lovely comments on the last chapter! I hope that you enjoy this one!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“So... You were awake.” It was a struggle for Jiang Cheng to force the words out of his throat, and they fell clumsily into the hollow silence between him and his brother as they sat cross-legged at the end of the pier. Unable to look at Wei Wuxian, he instead stared out over the lake, its waters dark grey in the clouded twilight. The same dark grey as his brother’s eyes. It was almost funny. His brother’s eyes were watery, too.

After a long moment, Wei Wuxian spoke, and it sounded as though he was finding it no easier than Jiang Cheng. “I know Shijie said we shouldn’t come back until we’ve talked, but... she doesn’t have to know what we did or didn’t say.”

Jiang Cheng breathed in. Counted to three. “You were awake.”

The silence returned for another aching long moment.

“I had to be awake,” Wei Wuxian said wearily, defeatedly. “If I wasn’t awake, and conscious, and willing the whole way through, it wouldn’t’ve worked. The energy would’ve dissipated, my golden core would’ve just gone, and then neither of us could’ve used it.”

Jiang Cheng closed his eyes, his heart stuttering as it begged him not to ask the next question. “When it happened, I was out of it for a week. Were... were you awake for seven days?”

Even with his eyes closed, he could hear the wince in Wei Wuxian’s voice. “Don’t ask me that, Jiang Cheng, I-”

“Were you?”

“No,” sighed Wei Wuxian. “I wasn’t.”

“How long? How long were you awake for?” When his brother didn’t answer, Jiang Cheng added, “if you don’t tell me, I’ll just ask Wen Qing.”

“Two days. I was awake for two days.”

Jiang Cheng’s breath caught in his throat, and the memory of the agony of Wen Zhuliu crushing his core echoed through him. Two days. Wei Wuxian had been through that – or

something like it, at least – for two days. He felt tears burn beneath his eyelids, felt his hands begin to shake.

He'd already known that it would have been agony. Even if he didn't remember his own torment, he couldn't forget the way Wei Wuxian broke down after Sizhui and Lan Wangji were captured.

*“Jin Guangyao, he wants – he wants to take Lan Zhan's core, I know he does, and if – if he threatens Sizhui Lan Zhan, Lan Zhan will agree, and they'll – they'll –” Wei Wuxian's voice broke, and he let out a harsh wail. “Shijie, it hurts so much, it – Lan Zhan – Lan Zhan –”*

And it had lasted two days.

His brother had gone through agony for *two days*.

He couldn't breathe.

“I don't regret it, Jiang Cheng,” said Wei Wuxian, his voice a little sharper now. “I won't ever regret it, no matter what you –”

“You're such a hypocrite,” Jiang Cheng muttered, forcing the words out from behind teeth, and his brother gave an angry laugh. “You can help everyone else, whether they want you to or not, but –”

“A hypocrite? There's four of them, Jiang Cheng, and they're *kids*! They didn't grow up overnight in a war like we did, they are *children* and I'm not letting any of them rip themselves open –”

“No one is ripping anyone open,” Jiang Cheng snapped back, finally opening his eyes again. “But you didn't ask my permission before you ripped *me* open! You didn't care whether or not I asked for it, you didn't care that I'd never want you to go through *that* for me!”

Wei Wuxian went pale, his eyes sparkling with tears and frustration, and Jiang Cheng shook his head.

“I have to live with it,” he said, his voice trembling with anger and anguish in equal measure. “I have to live with the knowledge that you went through *that*, that you tore yourself apart and went through that agony for *two days* – that you gutted yourself for my sake, that – *how*, Wei Wuxian? How am I supposed to live with that?”

Wei Wuxian looked down, tears clinging to his eyelashes. “I never wanted you to have to...”

Anger and grief broke from Jiang Cheng's chest in a strange mix of a sob and a cry, and he smashed his fist into the pier beneath him, the wood splintering beneath his blow. “*Wei Wuxian* – that – that's not the point, that's – that's so *far* from the point, I – you never gave me a choice! I never, you never – I – It doesn't *matter*! God, why is this so hard for you to understand? Why do you *always* have to shove everyone else aside to play the hero?”

Wei Wuxian sighed heavily, hanging his head. “Our clan was decimated, Jiang Cheng... there was no one else to bring shame or danger upon.”

Jiang Cheng stared dumbly at him for a long moment, unable to understand what the hell his brother was talking about. Then, it clicked, and his stomach churned. “You – you think I get mad about you playing the hero because of the effect it has on the clan?”

Wei Wuxian frowned at him, as though this was obvious, and Jiang Cheng felt like Zidian was crushing his heart.

“Wei Wuxian,” he said, his voice strangled. “I don’t – I don’t like seeing you *hurt*! Every time you try and protect someone else you get hurt and I *hate* it!”

There were tears on Wei Wuxian’s cheeks now, and he stared down at the lake as though he wanted it to reach up and swallow him whole. He looked small and young and afraid, and Jiang Cheng wanted to scream.

“I don’t know how to cope with it,” he choked. “I don’t – I don’t – I *hate* seeing you get hurt, Wei Wuxian, you’re my brother and it hurts, and I don’t – and now I have to know that the worst pain you ever felt was because of me.”

“I’m sorry,” Wei Wuxian whispered, his voice wavering. “I can’t... I can’t say I’m sorry for doing it, but... but I’m sorry that it hurts you.”

“Then take better care of yourself!” snapped Jiang Cheng, but his voice was trembling just as badly as his brother’s. “Why do you always think it’s better that *you* get hurt rather than someone else?”

Wei Wuxian refused to look at him, his hands gripping the pier beneath them. Jiang Cheng couldn’t understand it. He’d never understood it. He didn’t know why Wei Wuxian cared so little about himself, he didn’t know why he always seemed so surprised to see that his pain hurt others.

He didn’t understand – especially given how much everyone loved Wei Wuxian, how much everyone always had, with the painful exception of Jiang Cheng’s mother. With the rest of Yunmeng Jiang, it had always been obvious how adored Wei Wuxian was, how much the younger disciples had idolised him, how much the older disciples had humoured him. Even Jiang Fengmian had so blatantly loved Wei Wuxian more –

Jiang Cheng’s breath froze in his lungs.

Normally, when he thought of his father’s partiality towards Wei Wuxian, Jiang Cheng’s heart fixated on his own pain and jealousy, but as his mind tumbled through his worst memories it hit points he hadn’t thought of before – moments he’d hardly noticed happening at the time, being too caught up in his own terror and grief.

But now he remembered it clear as day, his father reaching past A-Jie to put a hand on Wei Wuxian’s shoulder, Wei Wuxian who was always his favourite, who he’d always seemed to love so deeply – his father had reached to him, and said;

*“A-Ying, you must always take care of A-Cheng and A-Li.”*

As though he wasn't their brother. As though his life meant nothing if he wasn't putting it in front of theirs.

"Jiang Cheng?" Wei Wuxian asked hesitantly, anxiously, and Jiang Cheng realised abruptly that he had been frozen stiff, that he wasn't breathing.

Jiang Cheng had always known that had been his mother's intention, that the only reason she had saved Wei Wuxian was so he could be a final defence between Jiang Cheng and the Wen. He had always known, and it had always hurt, but he'd never thought – he'd never realised –

Fuck... he was as much of an idiot as Wei Wuxian was, he was a hundred times more selfish...

But... but...

"It's no wonder," he breathed, his voice coming out much higher than he expected it to.

"It's... it's no wonder you're so fucked up, no wonder you don't think... they were wrong, Wei Wuxian, they were so wrong!"

"What are you talking about?" asked Wei Wuxian anxiously, staring at Jiang Cheng as though he'd lost his mind.

"My... my parents," Jiang Cheng whispered, and Wei Wuxian's eyes widened in surprise.

"A-Niang, she, she never should've treated you the way she did, and – and it wasn't your fault the Wen attacked us, and she must've known it wasn't and – and that was awful, but... A-Die... A-Die was wrong too, on the boat, he - he was so wrong to say that to you – that you should take care of us? Like, like you're nothing more than – god, it's no wonder you... Fuck..." A sob broke from Jiang Cheng's chest and he squeezed his eyes shut tightly.

"Jiang Cheng!" Distress was rising in Wei Wuxian's voice, and he put a hesitant hand on Jiang Cheng's shoulder. "Jiang Cheng, of course he told me to take care of you, I-"

"Shut up," Jiang Cheng growled, twisting around and crushing his brother into a hug. "Shut up! Would you say that to Sizhui?"

"It's different," Wei Wuxian said, but really the words were more like a sob. "He's my son. Jiang-shushu-"

"Jingyi then," snapped Jiang Cheng, "or Zizhen – would you tell Sizhui and Jinling you loved them and then tell Jingyi or Zizhen nothing except an order to protect them? Because that's – that's what A-Die did to you, he – you were younger than they are now!"

"It wasn't like that," said Wei Wuxian, his voice infuriatingly soothing. "There wasn't time to say anything, Jiang Cheng, I – I understood."

"You clearly fucking didn't," Jiang Cheng growled, clutching his brother tighter. "Because you still seem to think you're dispensable. You – you don't seem – don't seem to even *get* how much I love you!"

“Jiang Cheng,” Wei Wuxian murmured, and somehow amongst all the distress in his voice, there was an audible fondness there, too. “Jiang Cheng, I know you love me.”

“You better! Because I can’t take it, Wei Wuxian, I can’t *take* it if you keep tearing yourself apart for the sake of other people, especially if you’re not going to let us help you!”

Wei Wuxian stiffened in Jiang Cheng’s arms. He made to lean back, but Jiang Cheng wouldn’t let him, instead clutching tighter to the back of Wei Wuxian’s robes. “Jiang Cheng, I can’t let any of them go through that. I can’t.”

“I’m not saying we should! I’m saying if Wen Qing thinks there might be a way to do it better we should at least *try*.”

“And if it goes wrong? It’s not worth it, Jiang Cheng,” asked Wei Wuxian tersely, and Jiang Cheng drew back to punch his brother in the arm.

“Yes it fucking is! If there’s a way to help you without hurting them of course it’s worth it!”

“There’s not going to be a way to help me without hurting them, Jiang Cheng-”

“There might be! But you’re shutting down all talk of it and that’s not going to help anyone!”

Wei Wuxian looked away, his jaw set angrily. But Jiang Cheng thought he could see something else in his brother’s eyes, something uncomfortably – heartbreakingly – familiar.

Jiang Cheng took a deep breath, and forced himself to lower his voice. “Do you know what I think? I think you’re scared that if you do try, it won’t work. That you’ll get your hopes up, and it won’t work.” He saw Wei Wuxian look sharply at him, and added, “I know you’re *more* worried about the time-travellers. I know that. But I also know what it feels like.”

Wei Wuxian deflated, looking away once more. There were tears clinging to his eyelashes, and his lip was trembling, and Jiang Cheng felt a lump rise in his throat. He tried to blink back his own tears, but soon realised it was useless, so he let them fall freely as he reached for his brother’s hand.

“No one’s asking you to watch A-Ling or any of the others going through what you did. No one’s asking you to let that happen to them. All we’re saying is that there might, maybe, be a way to help you. And we all want to try. I know you’re scared. But after everything... after everything that’s happened, everything we’ve gone through – after all the mistakes we’ve made, and the ones we *would’ve* made... after all the things you’ve done for me... It’s time you let us help you, too, Da-ge. Please.”

As Jiang Cheng spoke, Wei Wuxian seemed to grow smaller and smaller. He was shaking like a rabbit caught out in the cold, his lips pursed so tightly they turned white, and there were tears pouring down his cheeks, even when he closed his eyes.

After a long moment, Wei Wuxian’s lips cracked open, and he managed to whisper, “I wouldn’t be a good big brother if I wasn’t strong for my didi, would I?”

“You are strong for me, you moron,” said Jiang Cheng, rolling his eyes. “You always have been. If you fall apart and cry like a baby now that’s not going to change.”

Wei Wuxian gave a watery laugh, one that quickly turned into a sob. At once, Wei Wuxian pressed the back of his hand to his mouth, squeezing his eyes shut tighter, but Jiang Cheng reached out and pulled his brother into another – somewhat gentler – hug. Wei Wuxian buried his face in Jiang Cheng’s hair, trying to muffle his sobs in his shoulder, and Jiang Cheng rested his face against his brother’s hair. He let himself sob, too, until he could no longer tell whose cries were whose.

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Letting out a long, low breath, Sizhui opened his eyes.

It was strange, now, being alone – very strange. Normally, Sizhui quite liked to spend a little time on his own – he didn’t *need* solitude the same way his father did, but he did find it comfortable, and often he felt more rested after an hour or two of his own company. He found it was especially helpful when he was overwhelmed, when he needed time to organise the thoughts in his head and sort through how he was really feeling.

And if watching your sixteen-year-old friend undergo a major qi deviation before your eyes and then discovering that you were at risk of such a thing yourself was not overwhelming, Sizhui didn’t know what was. It made sense, the revelation that they each bore a fragment of the core of the man who sent them back in time, but it was also terrifying. He knew that Wen Qing was confident in the medicine she gave them, that she meant it when she said that she had things under control, but it was impossible not to worry.

And yet – it might be able to help Wei Wuxian. If it was possible for Wei Wuxian to get a golden core again – Sizhui’s heart soared at the very thought of it, even as it quailed at the thought of what could go wrong.

All in all, Sizhui was feeling so many emotions that he’d be concerned about it even if he *wasn’t* at a heightened risk for qi deviation. So, the next morning when everyone else went to spend the day in Jinling’s rooms, Sizhui stayed behind, promising to join them later.

At first, it had been harder than he had expected. When the sound of Hanguang Jun’s footsteps and Wei Wuxian’s chatter faded away, he had felt a stab of panic, and automatically reached to his side, where Jingyi was more often than not. Except now he was not there, because Sizhui had asked to be alone. Because he wanted to meditate.

But the last time Sizhui had been alone, he had been chained to a bed, watching his father walk away to what he’d been so sure would be his death.

Fear crawled like a nest of roaches in his stomach.

The silence had been jarring, and the stillness of the room eerie, and he had wanted to run after his fathers and Jingyi, to swear an oath never to be alone again –

And he had told himself quietly, and kindly, and aloud, that he was being ridiculous.

Then, he had sat in the proper manner, and steadied his breathing to meditate. It took a while longer than normal to get into it, but eventually he did, and after a few hours he felt better for it.

But only a little.

As he came out of the meditation, he felt anxiety scramble in his stomach once again, and his heart began to pick up speed in his chest. The hair on the back of his neck was standing up –

And then someone knocked softly on the door.

Sizhui jumped, his head snapping towards the door, and then he saw Wei Wuxian peek inside, a small smile on his face.

“Hi,” he said softly. “If you’re still meditating that’s fine, but if you’re done... I’ve brought some lunch.”

“Lunch would be lovely,” said Sizhui, a little embarrassed at how quickly his unease had vanished at the sight of his father. Wei Wuxian gave a small smile and came inside, passing Sizhui a tray.

“I can leave you be, if you’d like,” he said, but Sizhui shook his head, and Wei Wuxian smiled again.

The smile didn’t meet his eyes, and Sizhui’s heart hurt slightly. Wei Wuxian looked exhausted, with dark, bruise-like smudges beneath eyes that were far duller than usual, and he had been particularly quiet all day. Yesterday, Sizhui had heard from Jinling exactly how Wei Wuxian reacted to the news of the four core fragments, and the idea that they could somehow be able to create a new core for him. He had no doubt that was what was on his mind, what was eating at him.

For his part, Sizhui was resolved. Whether the core fragment within him was Mo Xuanyu’s or Wei Wuxian’s, it was Wei Wuxian who had used it to save him. It was Wei Wuxian who had sent Sizhui back, who had saved his life, time after time after time. If Sizhui could somehow give just a fragment of his core back, if Wei Wuxian could get back just a fraction of what he’d lost...

If there was a way to do it, Sizhui wouldn’t hesitate.

Still, Sizhui understood Wei Wuxian’s reluctance, perhaps more than the others did. He knew that the original operation Wen Qing had devised was nothing less than torture.

He still woke up at night with the sound of Hanguang Jun’s scream ringing in his ears.

But Wen Qing promised that she wouldn’t do *that* surgery, that there might still be a way to try something else, and Sizhui was determined to help in any way that he could. Wei Wuxian, on the other hand, seemed determined to ignore any and all talk of it.

Although, Sizhui noted, now he wasn’t talking about anything. Though he sat down beside Sizhui, he didn’t say anything while Sizhui ate. Sizhui used to be silent during meals, but



he wasn't used to *Wei Wuxian* being silent ever. At all. A little concerned, Sizhui paused, putting down his chopsticks.

"Xian-gege... is everything alright?"

Wei Wuxian gave a soft, humourless laugh. "Ah, not really... But don't worry about it, A-Zhui, eat your rice."

Automatically Sizhui nodded, obediently picking up his chopsticks again, but he finished as quickly as he could – while being polite – and then he set the tray aside, turning to face Wei Wuxian.

"Xian-gege... Is this... is this about what Qing-jie wants to--"

Wei Wuxian flinched so violently that Sizhui stopped talking. His face had gone porcelain white, and Sizhui swallowed.

"I'm sorry," he murmured automatically, and Wei Wuxian closed his eyes, shuddering slightly. "We just want to help, Xian-gege."

"It's not – I don't want to talk about that, Sizhui, that's not --" He paused, shaking his head, and then he opened his eyes. "That's not what I wanted to talk about. But I did... I did want to talk to you. Alone." A wry, weary smile tugged at his lip. "It's hard to get any of you alone nowadays."

Sizhui smiled back, trying to keep the nervousness from his face. He couldn't have done much of a good job, because Wei Wuxian's smile grew softer, and he pinched Sizhui's cheek gently.

"Don't look so worried," he said. "It's not – well, I hope it's not a bad thing. But I do want to be serious."

"Okay..."

Wei Wuxian took a deep breath, and his cheeks went slightly pink. "So... Lan Zhan and I are getting married."

Surprise shot through Sizhui – this was far from the topic of conversation he was expecting – but it was quickly overcome with glee. He beamed, his heart lightening for the first time all day. "Congratulations!"

Wei Wuxian smiled, strangely shyly, and with a start, Sizhui remembered that his father was now little more than three years older than him. It had been easy to forget after seeing Wei Wuxian in action, and after the way he'd been taking care of Sizhui and the others, but now Sizhui saw it again, a youth and vulnerability that he was not used to seeing.

"Thank you," he said, rubbing the back of his neck. Then, he took a deep breath, and his face became more serious. "Because of that, I... I need to ask you... How would you feel if A-Yuan calls Lan Zhan 'Baba?'"

Sizhui blinked. “How would *I* feel?”

Wei Wuxian nodded sombrely. “Would you be uncomfortable with that?”

Bewildered, Sizhui shook his head. “Why would I be uncomfortable?”

Wei Wuxian glanced down at his hands for a moment. “Because that’s what *you* call Lan Zhan, isn’t it? A-Yuan... A-Yuan is getting things you never got to have,” he said quietly, “and I don’t want – I don’t want you to think that he’s taking that from you. I don’t want you to think you’re any less important or any less loved than he is.”

For a moment, all that Sizhui could do was stare. There were tears in his father’s eyes, though they weren’t falling, and Wei Wuxian looked so sincere, so serious – so sincere and serious that Sizhui couldn’t help but question himself and wonder if he actually *had* thought that A-Yuan was more dearly loved than he was.

He was quite sure that he hadn’t – of course, Sizhui had wondered what his life would have been like if *he* had lived A-Yuan’s life, but Sizhui had lived a good life of his own in Cloud Recess, and now he got to have Hanguang Jun and Wei Wuxian, too. Besides, he liked A-Yuan. In his humble opinion, the child was very cute. Really, it was a win-win situation.

“A-Zhui?” Wei Wuxian asked anxiously, and Sizhui realised that he still hadn’t replied.

“I don’t think that, Xian-gege,” he promised. “I’ve never thought that. And I think it would be more uncomfortable if A-Yuan *didn’t* call Hanguang Jun ‘Baba.’”

Wei Wuxian smiled, but there was a lingering doubt in his eyes. “Are you sure?”

“Very sure,” Sizhui promised again, nodding.

Wei Wuxian gave another breathless laugh, shaking his head slightly. “A-Zhui... you’re too good, you know... you’re far too good.” He leant forward, pulling Sizhui into a tight hug. “You’re going to be okay, Sizhui, alright? You’re not allowed not to be, I won’t permit it.”

“Okay, Xian-gege,” Sizhui said, returning the hug and resting his chin on his father’s shoulder.

*You’re going to be alright too, he thought fiercely. You’re going to get your core back, and you’re going to be fine. Just you wait and see.*

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading! Please do let me know what you thought of this chapter, I love hearing from you! Until next time, please take care.

# Chapter 46

## Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for all your lovely comments on the last chapter, and to everyone who's left kudos and also just been enjoying this story. I appreciate you all more than I can say! I'm sorry for the slight delay on this chapter, I very much hope it is worth it :D Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

With a small, weary smile, Wei Wuxian let A-Yuan's happy chatter was over him as he combed through his son's wet hair. Outside, the afternoon was turning towards evening, and truth be told it was a little early for A-Yuan's bath, but they'd spent the day climbing trees and tromping through the woods. A-Yuan, of course, had managed to fall into the muddiest puddle within a hundred li. It was a little disappointing – Wei Wuxian would have been happy to stay out later, showing A-Yuan what a real forest looked like, how much safer and stronger the trees were when they weren't dead and rotting inside. A-Yuan was utterly enthralled by the bright green of leaves and moss and grass, and the birds that flitted from branch to branch, and he'd taken to climbing trees with a gleeful enthusiasm that made Wei Wuxian's heart sing.

However, it was still winter, so when a snickering Wei Wuxian pulled his son out of the muddy puddle he'd all but belly-flopped into, he thought it would be best to head back. The water was freezing, and he was sure it wouldn't be long before A-Yuan got cold and uncomfortable. A-Yuan was so filthy that Wei Wuxian had to draw a second bath to plonk him in when the water in the first tub turned brown. A-Yuan found it utterly hilarious, and he was thrilled that he had managed to get mud in his nose and ears, and he'd giggled all the way through the bath.

Now, A-Yuan was still cheerful, chatting away about all the things that they had seen in the forest and wiggling enthusiastically where he was sitting on the end of the bed. It made it a little tricky to comb through his hair, but Wei Wuxian didn't have it in him to chide his son, or even to ask him to sit still.

Right now, A-Yuan was the only member of his family who wasn't trying to convince him it would be worth it to cut into his time-travellers to make Wei Wuxian a new golden core. A-Yuan was the only thing keeping him from falling into panic at the very idea of it.

"Right," Wei Wuxian said, patting A-Yuan's back gently. "Turn around then, let me check there's no more mud in your nose."

A-Yuan wiggled around, raising his chin, and Wei Wuxian put on an expression of exaggerated concentration, taking A-Yuan's chin in his hands and turning his face here and

there. A-Yuan giggled, and Wei Wuxian nodded.

“Much better. Now, no one will be able to grow mushrooms in your ears.”

“You can’t grow mushrooms in your ears!” A-Yuan protested, and Wei Wuxian raised his eyebrows.

“Well, not anymore they can’t, there’s no dirt in there!” Wei Wuxian paused, and then he shifted, meeting A-Yuan’s eyes with a soft smile. “Hey, little radish... Can I tell you something?”

“Mn-hm,” A-Yuan said with a nod.

Wei Wuxian smiled. “Rich-gege and I are going to get married.”

“Married?” A-Yuan gasped, a delighted smile on his face.

Wei Wuxian laughed slightly. Even knowing that they were, in many ways, the same person, the resemblance between Sizhui and A-Yuan’s reactions was uncanny. “Yes, married.” He reached out and tucked A-Yuan’s hair behind his ear, brushing his thumb over the boy’s smiling cheek. “That means, if you’d like, Rich-gege can be your father, too.”

At once, A-Yuan’s expression changed. His eyes grew round with horror, and his mouth fell open, and then he drew back with a whimper, shaking his head. “No! *No!*”

Startled, Wei Wuxian reached out, taking A-Yuan’s hand before he could scramble back further. “Hey, hey, what’s wrong?”

“No!” A-Yuan whimpered, shaking his head desperately. “No, no, no, A-Die, you promised, you promised! I don’t *want* Rich-gege to be A-Die, I want you, I want –” His gasping words were drowned by sobs, and Wei Wuxian’s heart shattered.

“Oh, A-Yuan, no,” he murmured, sweeping forward and grabbing A-Yuan into his arms, holding him close to his chest. “No, little radish, that’s not what I meant. I’m here, I’m not going anywhere. I’m not going to leave you. I’m still going to be your A-Die, I’m *always* going to be your A-Die. No one’s ever going to take you away from me, not ever. I’m here. A-Die’s here, it’s okay. Shh, A-Yuan, shh, it’s okay. It’s okay.”

A-Yuan sobbed, hiding his face in Wei Wuxian’s neck and clutching at his robes, and Wei Wuxian winced, rubbing his back.

“It’s okay,” he murmured, pressing a kiss to A-Yuan’s forehead. “I’m sorry, A-Yuan, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you. I’m not going anywhere. I love you so much, little radish, so much. I will always, always, be your A-Die. Always. I promise.”

Sniffling, A-Yuan raised his face, his voice and lip trembling. “Th-then why, why did you – why did you s-say...?”

Wei Wuxian wiped the tears from A-Yuan’s cheeks, squeezing him a little tighter. “I didn’t mean that Rich-gege would be your A-Die *instead* of me. I didn’t mean that at all. When

grownups get married, that means they share everything, and it means that Rich-gege will be another father for you. Another one – an *extra* one, one that you get as well as me. I'll always be your A-Die, but he can be your Baba."

"Baba?" A-Yuan repeated hesitantly, and Wei Wuxian nodded, pressing another kiss to his hair.

"Mn-hm," said Wei Wuxian. "But only if you want to. It's okay if you don't. I know everything's changing, and I know it's scary. If you want to keep calling him Rich-gege, that's okay. I think he'd like it if you called him Baba, but you don't have to. It's your choice." He paused, gently poking A-Yuan's little nose. "You don't even have to decide now. Or you can decide now and then change your mind, later. Whatever makes you feel happy, okay?"

Hiding his face in Wei Wuxian's neck, A-Yuan gave a hum of agreement, but it sounded more hesitant than usual and Wei Wuxian closed his eyes, rocking him back and forth slightly.

"It's okay, A-Yuan, I promise," he repeated, cuddling him close. "It's okay. I'm sorry I scared you. I'm sorry. But you're never getting rid of me, okay? Not even if you decide that Lan Zhan's so good a Baba you don't need an A-Die anymore."

"Always need A-Die," A-Yuan mumbled into Wei Wuxian's neck. "Always."

"And I will always be A-Die," Wei Wuxian promised, rubbing A-Yuan's back. "I'm not going to leave you."

Eventually, A-Yuan gave a shuddering sigh, peeling himself away from Wei Wuxian's neck to settle more comfortably in his lap, looking up at his face. "Even when you marry Rich-gege, you stay with A-Yuan?"

"Most definitely," Wei Wuxian promised, pulling out a handkerchief and covering A-Yuan's nose. "Blow."

A-Yuan blew his nose obediently, and Wei Wuxian smiled, brushing the remains of his son's tears away with the back of his hand.

"There, that's better," he murmured. "There's nothing to worry about."

Avoiding his eyes, A-Yuan reached for Wei Wuxian's hair, tangling it through his fingers the way he often did when he was nervous about something. "What about Ling-gege?" he asked quietly. "Should we worry about him?"

Carefully hiding his own wince, Wei Wuxian shook his head, taking A-Yuan's chin in his fingers again and gently guiding him to meet his eyes. "What did Qing-jie say to you?"

"That Ling-gege's sick, and he needs to be calm and careful, but he's going to be okay," recited A-Yuan. He grabbed Wei Wuxian's hand and pulled it away from his chin, clinging to

it so tightly Wei Wuxian resigned himself to the temporary loss of that hand. “But A-Die, he – he was very – he looked very...”

“It was scary, wasn’t it?” said Wei Wuxian, and A-Yuan nodded, his lower lip wobbling a little. Wei Wuxian stroked his cheek gently, silently cursing that A-Yuan had ever had to see a qi deviation, let alone one striking his gege. “I thought it was scary, too. But Qing-jie is working on a way to make sure it never happens again, okay? For now, Jinling has to be very calm and careful, but the medicine and Rich-gege’s music help a lot, and soon Qing-jie will be able to fix him so he can be as excited and reckless as he wants to be.”

A-Yuan nodded slowly, his little fingers tracing the veins on the back of Wei Wuxian’s hand. “Like A-Die.”

Wei Wuxian gave a gasp of mock outrage, pressing his free hand to his chest. “A-Yuan! Such disrespect!”

But A-Yuan didn’t giggle, instead offering only half a smile, his eyes still focused on Wei Wuxian’s hand. Quietly, too quietly, he said, “Zhui-gege, Yi-gege, and Zhen-gege are sick too, aren’t they?”

A lump rose in Wei Wuxian’s throat, and he took a deep breath. It was so hard to know what to tell A-Yuan. He’d seen and heard so much – he’d *been* through so much – but he was still so small.

“A little,” he said carefully. “But they haven’t got as sick as Jinling, and Qing-jie is being very careful to make sure they won’t get any worse. To make sure that they’ll all be okay. And they will.”

A-Yuan nodded slowly, and then he took a deep breath and looked up at Wei Wuxian with worried eyes. “A-Die... Will... will A-Yuan get sick too?”

Wei Wuxian’s heart seized. “No,” he said firmly, hugging A-Yuan close. “No, A-Yuan. Ling-gege and the others are sick because of something that happened to them, but it can’t happen again. It can’t happen to anyone else, ever again, and definitely it won’t happen to you.”

“Are – are you sure?” A-Yuan whispered, and Wei Wuxian nodded, pressing a kiss to his son’s hair.

“I’m sure. I promise. You’re safe, A-Yuan. You’re safe.”

“Okay,” A-Yuan murmured, resting his head against Wei Wuxian’s chest. He didn’t sound entirely convinced and Wei Wuxian closed his eyes, cuddling him closer.

“I’m not going to let anything happen to you,” he murmured into A-Yuan’s hair. “You’re safe. Nothing’s going to hurt you. I’m here. I’m never going to let anything happen to you. You’re going to be fine. You’re safe. You’re safe.”

After a long moment, A-Yuan sighed, nestling his face closer to Wei Wuxian. “I love you, A-Die.”

“I love you, too, A-Yuan,” said Wei Wuxian immediately, pressing kiss after kiss to A-Yuan’s head. “I love you so, so much.”

“I love Rich-gege too, but... but...”

“You don’t have to call him Baba if you don’t want to,” promised Wei Wuxian. “But I think he’d like it if you do. Either way, I’m here. I’m not going anywhere.”

---

It had been three days since Jinling’s qi deviation, and Lan Wangji had spent every daylight hour of those days in the library. At times, he was reminded of the hours he had spent in Gusu pouring over music scores to try and help Wei Ying, but while that was still his goal, this could not feel more different.

Now, Wangji knew what was wrong – he understood the problem he was trying to solve. Most importantly, he was not alone. Wen Qing, too, was in the library from dawn to dusk, and Lan Wangji got the impression that she would have stayed overnight if Wen Ning didn’t nudge her back to her rooms. Surprisingly, though he had duties that prevented him from staying in the library all day, Jiang Wanyin spent countless hours there too, pouring over books and sharing theories with Wen Qing.

The four time-travellers themselves were also there, more often than not. They did what they could to help, too, but no one wanted to put too much pressure on any of them, so Wangji made sure that they passed most of their time by reading, drawing, or playing board games. Every two hours, they would meditate while Wangji played Cleansing, or other melodies from the Song of Clarity.

So far, between the seven of them, they’d got even further than Wangji had hoped – they were sure that the four fragments *could* be combined into a functional core. Wen Qing even had an idea as to how, but the problem was that such a thing could only be achieved if at least one of the core fragments was stable. To be stable, it had to be inside the body of a host, and constantly receiving spiritual energy. The host couldn’t be Wei Ying – the stream of spiritual energy would not be strong enough, meaning the core would dissipate before it could truly form. It was too dangerous for Wei Ying, far too dangerous. The alternative, however, would be to combine the cores inside the body of one of the time-travellers, but that was also out of the question. The host would have to be entirely awake, would have to endure the agony of the procedure without medication and *still* pour his own energy into the new core.

They had been working on the problem for the last two days, all of them together, and as of yet, they had no solution, but the atmosphere still was warm, and hopeful, and every day Wangji had wished that Wei Ying would join them there. He thought it would help him to understand how much they wanted to help, to feel that swell of hope, and he was certain that Wei Ying would be able to help immensely with the research. So far, however, Wei Ying had been avoiding the library – and, for that matter, everyone in it.

Until the door to the library opened, and A-Yuan and Wei Wuxian walked in, hand in hand.

“Hello!” A-Yuan said seriously. “A-Die says you’re all helping to find a way to make Ling-gege better. I want to help!”

Wangji glanced at Wei Wuxian. His lower lip was sticking out in a slight pout, subtle enough to be a serious look of discontent rather than an attempt at melodrama, and there was a tightness in his eyes as he stared towards the floor.

“I could really use your help with this picture,” said Zizhen, holding out his hand, and A-Yuan ran over eagerly, soon settling himself happily between Zizhen and Jingyi, and getting his hands swiftly covered with ink.

“You know, this would go a lot quicker if you helped us, Wei Wuxian,” said Wen Qing mildly.

“I’m sure it would,” Wei Ying muttered, making his way into the corner, where there was a pile of books on the Nie sect that Nie Huaisang had sent over. Slumping back against the wall, Wei Ying picked one up and began to read, and Wangji sighed slightly, looking away.

He thought Wei Ying would feel better for helping, but he also knew better than to push. Wen Qing and Jiang Wanyin were clearly thinking along the same lines – they shared a glance, shook their heads, and returned to their notes with wry smiles that were startlingly similar.

For his part, Wangji returned to the tome he was reading. It was a book about spiritual tools, and how they came to be imbued with power. He was trying to find a part during the process of crafting a spiritual weapon where one could use it as a host for the core, but so far he’d been having no luck. He knew that a tool with a spirit of its own would not be a viable host for the core fragments – it would simply not have the capacity. However, a spiritual weapon or tool would not be strong enough to house such energy as that of the core fragments until it had developed a spirit of its own. There was no middle ground, none that Wangji could see, at least.

Much to Wangji’s annoyance, Lan Liqin had joined several Jiang disciples on a Night Hunt and was not due back for a week or so. Wangji was sure that he could help – among the Lan, his knowledge of spiritual weapons was second to none. In Wangji’s own hands the book had been useless, but he lived in hope.

Wei Ying certainly did not seem to be living in hope. In fact, it looked a lot more like he was sulking, which was a problem, because it was unreasonably adorable. Something about the pout of his lip and the hunching of his shoulders and the intensity in his eyes made Wangji want to pull him into an embrace, to kiss him until his smile returned, and –

It was a problem. Such thoughts were not conducive to good study.

Soon, the time came for Cleansing, and the four time-travellers obediently came to sit before Wangji to meditate. A-Yuan followed them over curiously, watching as Lan Wangji pulled out his guqin.

“Is this the music that’s like medicine?” he asked, leaning against Wangji’s side. “The music that will make all my gege feel better?”

Wangji nodded with a small smile. “Mn.”



“Baba, can A-Yuan help with the music?”

Lan Wangji froze. It felt like he was walking up a flight of stairs and missed a step, like he was falling through the air so fast he could barely breathe – and it was a wonderful feeling. It was a terrifying feeling.

Quickly, Wangji looked to the corner, and saw Wei Ying smiling softly at them, and then he glanced to Sizhui, who was beaming so brightly that Wangji was almost blinded. He could feel others’ eyes on him too, but he couldn’t bring himself to look at anyone else. Instead, he returned his attention to A-Yuan, who was gazing expectantly at him.

“Yes,” Wangji whispered, his voice barely audible. He cleared his throat, and then nodded, holding out his hand. “Of course.” A-Yuan climbed into his lap happily, and Wangji held out his arms. “Place your hands on my hands.” Without hesitating, A-Yuan rested his hands on the back of Wangji’s hands. “Good. Now, take a deep breath. You must concentrate, and be quiet. And we will play together.”

“Okay, Baba,” A-Yuan whispered, and then he took a big, deep, breath, his cheeks puffed up as he held it, and Wangji smiled.

“You don’t need to *hold* your breath,” said Wangji. “Just breathe slowly, and deeply, and focus on the music.” A-Yuan nodded, and Wangji began to play, his hands moving slowly and carefully through the notes of Cleansing.

All the while, A-Yuan’s hands remained on top of his, his little fingers splayed out on top of Wangji’s. As the song progressed, Lan Wangji could feel A-Yuan’s fingertips pressing down one at a time, *almost* in time with Wangji’s own fingers pulling at the strings. It was adorable, and wonderful, and he wondered if Sizhui could play. He wondered if this was how he had been taught. It certainly wasn’t how Wangji had learnt – Shufu would have never let him sit in such an improper manner, leaning back against his chest like it was a pillow.

He hoped it was how Sizhui learnt. A-Yuan so clearly needed touch, and comfort, things Lan Wangji had never learnt how to give. It came so naturally with A-Yuan, and he hoped with all his heart that it had been the same with Sizhui.

It was a moment that Wangji never wanted to end, and he played through the song three times before finally calming the strings.

“Wow,” A-Yuan whispered reverently, glancing over his shoulder at Wangji. “Did I do it right, Baba?”

The word ‘Baba’ made his heart soar, and automatically Wangji wrapped an arm around A-Yuan, hugging him close.

“Yes,” he said. “You did very well. What did you think, Sizhui?”

Sizhui beamed at him, nodding. “You did fantastically, A-Yuan. Some of the best playing I’ve ever heard.”

A-Yuan smiled back, but he kept his hands on Wangji's hands as he asked, "Ling-gege, do you feel better?"

Jinling blinked, as though he was surprised to be asked for his opinion, but then he smiled, and nodded. "Much better. Thank you, A-Yuan."

A-Yuan beamed, just as brightly as Sizhui, and twisting around in Wangji's lap to look up at him. "We helped, Baba! A-Yuan helped!"

"A-Yuan did help," said Wangji fondly, and A-Yuan clapped his hands together happily.

"How else can A-Yuan help?" he asked eagerly, his eyes shining.

"Well, I was thinking of a perfect way to beat Jinling at Weiqi, but I just don't think that I can do it on my own," said Jingyi, rubbing his jaw. "Can you help me?"

To Wangji's surprise, A-Yuan hesitated. "Are you sure that's help? I helped Baba play the medicine music. I can help! I'm a big boy!"

"It's definitely help," said Jingyi earnestly. "We're all trying to solve a problem, and this helps with problem solving."

"Okay!" A-Yuan said cheerfully, looking back at Wangji. "Do you need any more help, Baba?"

Lan Wangji wanted to say yes, to keep A-Yuan tucked in his lap and playing along with him, but that was neither practical nor helpful, so he shook his head. "No, thank you. I will need to play again later – you may help me then, if you like."

"I can help!" said A-Yuan, and he hugged Wangji tightly. Wangji hugged him back, but A-Yuan broke away too soon, scrambling across to Jingyi to play Weiqi.

Wangji couldn't help but smile slightly. He glanced to the corner, and butterflies fluttered through his stomach. Wei Ying was smiling too, his eyes soft and fond as he watched A-Yuan settle down with Jingyi. Unfortunately, shortly after that Jiang Wanyin and Wen Qing began discussing another theory, and Wei Ying's face fell into a scowling pout again.

With a soft sigh, Wangji returned his attention to the book, vaguely keeping half an ear on what Wen Qing and Jiang Wanyin were saying.

"...if we went on the same sort of theory as *that* sort of exorcism, we could remove the spirit from the sword and use it as a vessel-

"Won't work," said Wei Ying.

"Why not?" demanded Jiang Wanyin.

"Because you can't remove the spirit from a spiritual tool without destroying it. Even if you somehow did, the shell of it would be so fragile that it wouldn't be able to hold even a fragment of a core."

“So what do *you* think we should do then?” Jiang Wanyin scowled.

Wei Ying narrowed his eyes at his brother. “No. I’m not stupid enough to fall for that. I’m not helping.”

“Why not?” asked A-Yuan in surprise, looking up. “Why don’t you want to help, A-Die?”

Wei Ying’s eye twitched as though he wanted to wince, though he gave a wry smile instead. “I’m just not any good at medicine.”

“A-Yuan’s helping with problem solving!” protested A-Yuan. “A-Die can help with problem solving. A-Die’s very smart.”

“*Is* he very smart?” mused Jiang Wanyin, and Wei Ying scowled, throwing a book at him.

“Smarter than you,” Wei Ying retorted.

Jiang Wanyin rolled his eyes. “I’m your sect leader. Show some respect.”

“No,” Wei Ying grumbled, picking up another book and slumping down further against the wall.

Wangji glanced back at the book in his own hands, thinking on Wei Ying’s words. It was true that he had never heard of a spiritual tool losing its spirit and remaining intact. Even the Stygian Tiger Amulet had shattered when Wei Ying destroyed it, the most intact part crumpled in on itself like cheap tin.

Except...

Wangji had held one of the broken parts of the amulet, while Wei Ying was recovering from destroying it. He had asked to see, to know what it was that had been done, and Wei Ying had wearily placed it into the palm of his hand.

It was unmistakably crumpled and broken, and unmistakably empty. The resentful energy had all gone, leaving behind a gnawing sense of emptiness. Hollowness.

But while it had felt broken and scarred and empty, it had not felt fragile.

“Wen-guniang,” he asked, “how big would a vessel have to be?”

Wen Qing pursed her lips for a moment as she considered. “Not big... The fragments themselves are tiny, as far as I can tell, and in any case they aren’t exactly *physical*... It would not have to be bigger than a cup.”

Wangji nodded, considering. Then, he rose. “Excuse me. I will return soon.”

Barely waiting for anyone’s reply, he swept out of the library, walking as swiftly as he could to Wei Ying’s rooms. He made straight for the drawer, retrieving the soft, silk pouch that held all that was left of the amulet he loathed so much.

He sat at the table, and gently poured out the contents of the pouch. One half was utterly shattered, a collection of flat shards too warped and torn to ever be fused back together. The other, however, seemed to have imploded rather than exploded. It was the half he had held before, and Wangji turned it over in his hands.

What had once been the tiger's head had been blasted off – he'd seen the mangled piece among the others – but inside...

Inside, the amulet was still hollow, down to the point where the metal had been crushed against itself. The space was not large – but it was, just about, the size of a cup.

His heart racing, Wangji paused. He knew that Wei Ying had purged all the resentful energy from the amulet. That what he had in his hands was only a shell. That it should, according to all theories he knew, pose no danger to him.

Taking a deep breath, Lan Wangji poured a small stream of energy into the amulet, before clapping his hand over the hole where the tiger's head had once been. His heart beat faster, more frantically, and he swallowed, waiting.

Waiting.

Waiting.

If poured straight into the air, spiritual energy would dissipate within a minute, usually far less. Wangji waited for three minutes before removing his hand.

There was soft, blue glow within the empty shell of the amulet.

---

It was the last piece of the puzzle.

There was still more to establish, to work out, to decide, but it all seemed to go so smoothly from them. Just two days later, Wen Qing declared that it was time – that she was ready, that the medical rooms had been completely prepared. Wen Yingyue and Zhou Yuran had both been instructed how to assist her, and then taken Wangji, Jiang Wanyin and Wei Wuxian notes for the surgery several times. By now, Wangji knew almost as well as the doctors how it would work, what each step would be. Both he and Wanyin were to be present to provide spiritual energy where needed – Wen Qing and the other two doctors would need their own. Outside the operating room, Wen Ning was waiting to prepare and carry in each of the boys in turn.

Wei Ying had been difficult to convince, even with Wen Qing pointing out that she would have to operate on the boys to remove the core fragments anyway, if they did not want them to all qi deviate before the end of the year. However, with promises that the four time-travellers would be in no pain, and that they would stop immediately if anything went wrong, and that Wei Ying could wait in the recovery room and make sure that the boys were alright before his own surgery, he surrendered. Wearily, and reluctantly, but he still surrendered.

Jinling was first. Not only was the core fragment within him one of the strongest, but it had once belonged to Wei Wuxian himself – it made sense to start with him. He looked surprisingly calm as Wen Qing handed him a cup of medicine.

“Remember,” she said, “you will be awake, and there are times that I’ll need you to concentrate, but there shouldn’t be any pain. If you *do* feel pain, I need you to tell me immediately. Do not try to be brave – it will help none of us. Do you understand?”

Jinling nodded, and reached for Jiang Wanyin’s hand.

For a moment, the memory of Wen Qing’s blade cutting into his own core overcame Wangji, the echo of the pain shooting through him, but he took a deep breath, closing his eyes. He wished that Wei Ying could have been offered such an option as the time-travellers, that if he *had* to give away his core he could have at least done so without pain, but Wen Qing had told him quietly that it had been impossible.

“That’s what I tried myself, after realising it wouldn’t work if he was unconscious. But with Wei Wuxian, I was removing his whole core – a core that was bound to his body. By numbing him, I also dulled the connection between his physical body and his golden core. As soon as I began the incision, the energy closest to the cut began to dissipate, and without the closer connection to his core, Wei Wuxian could do nothing to stop it. He had to be fully conscious to have enough awareness to hold his core together as I... well.” Here, Wen Qing had paused, and cleared her throat. “As far as I can tell, the fragments within Jinling and the others are attached to their own cores. If that’s the case, I don’t need to sever the connection between spiritual energy and any physical matter, so it should not matter. If I’m wrong, we will have to reconsider.”

To that, Wangji agreed. As desperately as he wanted Wei Ying to have a core again, he could not bear the thought of Sizhui or the others experiencing any fraction of the pain he felt on that table.

They did, however, have to be awake. This served two purposes – the first was that Wen Qing hoped maintaining an awareness would keep the core fragments intact as they were severed, though she couldn’t be sure that was possible. The second, and arguably more important reason was so that they could ensure they weren’t doing any damage to the time-travellers, or their own cores.

“I can hardly feel anything at all,” Jinling said wondrously, prodding at his stomach. Then, his eyes widened, and he looked up at Wen Qing. “I can’t move my legs!”

“No,” she agreed, sounding a little amused. “The needles will see to that. It’s best if you don’t fidget during the surgery. You can’t sit up, either, but you should be able to move your arms and your neck well enough.”

“Okay,” Jinling breathed, sounding slightly nervous. Wen Yingyue carefully placed a frame over Jinling’s torso, arranging a thick black curtain over it so he would not be able to see what Wen Qing was doing.

“You’re alright, A-Ling,” murmured Jiang Wanyin, and Jinling gave a weak smile.

“I know, Jiujiu.”

Wen Qing tested Jinling several times to ensure that the drugs had taken affect, and then she nodded. “It’s time.”

Wangji took his place opposite Jiang Wanyin at the head of the bed, ready to pass Jinling energy if instructed, and he found that his view, too, was blocked by the curtain.

He didn’t mind that at all.

Jinling’s face twisted into a strange expression, one of confusion or discomfort, or perhaps both, and his hand appeared to tighten around Jiang Wanyin’s.

“Can you feel it?” he asked sharply, and Jinling shook his head slightly.

“I don’t – not really but – sort of? It doesn’t hurt, at all, but it – it feels... it feels like someone’s just shifting my insides around,” he said, sounding slightly ill.

“That’s because I am,” said Wen Qing. “Now, concentrate on your golden core. I need you to focus on holding all your energy in one place, and holding it stable.”

Jinling nodded and closed his eyes, his breathing becoming deep and controlled, and Wangji found himself holding his own breath. A minute passed, and then another, then another, and then Wen Qing said sharply, “Jiang Cheng, now! Hanguang Jun, hold.”

Wangji watched as Jiang Wanyin sent a stream of spiritual energy into his nephew’s wrist, and Jinling shuddered, though he kept his breathing even and deep. Automatically, Wangji put a hand on the boy’s shoulder, and Jinling’s eyes snapped open to look up at him in surprise. Then, Jinling gave a brave smile, and Wangji nodded.

Just moments later, Wen Qing said, “Hanguang Jun!” and Lan Wangji stepped towards her, holding out his hands. Spiritual energy was already glowing around his hands as he took the amulet from her bloodied fingers, covering the opening at the top with his palm. He could feel the heated buzz of unfamiliar energy beneath his hand, and he took a deep breath, gently coaxing just a little of his own energy into the amulet, too. He knew he had to be careful, and slow – too much energy would destabilise the core fragment entirely. Too little, and it ran the risk of dissipating, even protected inside the amulet.

No one needed to speak to know what needed to be done next. Wen Yingyue began to sew the wound on Jinling’s abdomen as Wen Ning carried Jingyi into the room, settling him down on the bed opposite Jinling. At once, Wen Qing checked the placement of the needles and the amount of feeling Jingyi had, and almost immediately, she had Zhou Yuran set up the curtain. With Wen Yingyue’s blessing, Wen Ning carried Jinling out of the room to recover, and Jiang Wanyin took his place by Jingyi’s head.

“Well, this is weird,” said Jingyi a little breathlessly, looking for the most part unperturbed. That was, until Wen Qing’s hands moved inside him – at that point he grimaced, and shook his head. “I don’t like that at all.”

“Pain?” Wen Qing asked sharply, and Jingyi shook his head.

“No, just... weird.”

“Alright. That’s good. Concentrate.”

Jingyi took a deep breath, and obeyed.

It went smoothly. Almost concerningly smoothly. Before long, Wen Qing called Wangji to her side, and for the first time he saw the other side of the curtain.

He very much wished he had not – there was something about staring at the inside of a living person that was deeply disconcerting. However, that was not what required his focus – he closed his eyes and concentrated on the energy beneath his hand, willing it to be stable, to hold –

“Now!”

Wangji moved his hand away from the opening to the amulet, and Wen Qing immediately took it from him. He opened his eyes, watching as she covered it with her own palm, as Zhou Yuran swept down to begin sewing Jingyi back up.

The combining of the cores was not a part Wangji could help with. It was delicate work, and no one trusted anyone but Wen Qing to do it.

Lan Wangji wasn’t sure even she would be able to.

Time seemed to drag. Jingyi was carried out of the room, and Zizhen brought in, but still Wen Qing did not open her eyes, her lips moving slightly as she focused her energy on the amulet in her hands.

It was nearly half an hour before she opened her eyes with a gasp, and then gave a weary smile.

“Hanguang Jun, same as before,” she said, passing back the amulet, and he nodded, taking the amulet and cradling it in his hands.

“Are you alright to continue?” Jiang Wanyin asked Wen Qing, and she nodded.

“Let’s get this done.”

Wangji hadn’t expected to be able to feel the change in the energy, in the core that was coming together, but he could. It was almost like a tiny heartbeat resting against his palm, a warm beat of hope, and he fed his energy into it carefully, gently.

Zizhen’s operation was even quicker than Jingyi’s, and this time Wen Qing bound the fragments of the core in half the time. By the time she was operating on Sizhui, the amulet in Wangji’s hands was so warm it almost burnt.

Finally, Wen Qing coaxed the fragment of Wei Ying's old core from Sizhui into the amulet, and then Wangji stepped back. While she bound it to the rest, he stepped into the next room, where Wei Ying was fussing over Jinling, Jingyi, and Zizhen.

"Wei Ying."

Wei Ying looked up at him, the colour draining from his face. He swallowed, looking utterly terrified, and Wangji held out his hand.

"It is time."

Wei Ying swallowed again.

"It's okay, Wei Wuxian," said Jinling quietly. "You've got this."

"See you on the other side," Zizhen offered gently, and Jingyi gave an eager nod.

Wei Ying took Wangji's hand. His skin was like ice, but his palms were clammy, and Wangji led him into the operating room, to the bed that was waiting. Sizhui offered a smile and a wave, even as Wen Ning carried him away to recover with the others. Wei Ying watched him go with aching eyes, and then he began to tremble. With an aching heart, Wangji reached for the small bottle at the bedside. This time, at least, Wei Ying would have the mercy of sleeping through the operation.

"Wei Ying..."

"Lan Zhan," Wei Ying whispered, looking back at him and gripping Wangji's hand painfully tight. There was a terror in his eyes, bright and wild, and it tore at Wangji's heart. "Lan Zhan, I..."

"I know," Lan Wangji murmured, kissing Wei Ying gently. "It is okay to be afraid."

"What if... what if," Wei Ying gasped, but Wangji pressed the bottle of medicine into his hands.

"No 'what if's. They do not help. It will be over soon," he promised, and he prayed that 'it' would include being coreless.

Closing his eyes, Wei Ying shuddered and nodded, draining the bottle of medicine in one. Then, he shuddered again, leaning his head against Lan Wangji's chest.

"Lan Zhan," he whispered. It sounded like he was begging. "Lan Zhan..."

Wangji held Wei Ying close, running his hand over his hair. "Sleep. I will be here when you wake. Whatever happens, we will face it. I love you, Wei Ying. I love you."

"Lan Zhan..."

Within minutes, Wei Ying was asleep. Within minutes, Wen Qing was ready.



Reluctantly, Wangji laid Wei Ying down on the bed. He pressed a kiss to his forehead, and held out his hands for the amulet one last time.

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! I hope you enjoyed that chapter, it was tricky to write but I'm pretty happy with the end result! Please do let me know what you think if you're so inclined, I love hearing from you so much! Until next time, please take care.

# Chapter 47

## Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for the lovely response to the last chapter! I'm so sorry for the delay in getting this chapter up - I've had a busy week with some matters in the real world that required my attention (and, unfortunately, all my energy) so not only is this chapter late, but it's shorter than I'd hoped. Still, things are pretty much solved now and went well, so the next chapter SHOULD be up on schedule in three days! I hope you enjoy this mini chapter in the meantime!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It was warm. So utterly, wonderfully warm. It seemed to start within him, a glowing in his torso that somehow also felt like a dozen feather-soft blankets wrapped snugly around him, and it was familiar, and it was safe –

... and it was unexpected.

Something about it was unexpected. Wei Wuxian wasn't sure what, or why. He wasn't sure of much at all. His mind was a haze of warmth and contentment, reluctant to come any further out of sleep. Vaguely, he was aware of his body, but it felt faraway, somehow. That didn't faze him. He was in no rush to wake up. He was in no rush to do anything.

It was just so peaceful here. Just so warm.

Slowly, he began to become aware of sounds around him. Voices. He couldn't make out the words at first, but they were all voices he knew well, voices familiar enough to make his heart smile.

Wen Qing. Jiang Cheng. Lan Zhan.

He wondered what they were saying, a lazy curiosity drawing his attention long enough to hear,

“...stirring, but it'll be a while before he's truly conscious...”

And,

“I need to check on my nephews – Hanguang Jun, if-”

“I am going nowhere.”

Yes, Wei Wuxian thought, his head automatically trying to turn towards the sound of Lan Zhan's voice as affection rose within him. *Stay, Lan Zhan. Stay.*

The voices of Wen Qing and Jiang Cheng faded away, and Wei Wuxian felt a hand take his wrist. A moment later, he felt Lan Zhan's spiritual energy course into his body, melding deliciously with the wonderful warmth, and Wei Wuxian let out a sigh of content.

“Wei Ying?”

His lips parted slightly, but it seemed too much effort to speak, or even to open his eyes. So instead, he smiled, and sighed again.

“Sleep,” said Lan Zhan gently, and Wei Wuxian could hear the smile in his own voice.

Then, he felt Lan Zhan's lips against his own, a gentle kiss that Wei Wuxian wanted to last forever, but already he could feel himself slipping further down into sleep. He let out a slight whine, trying to stay awake, to chase the kiss, but his head felt so heavy.

“Sleep,” Lan Zhan whispered against his lips. “And Wei Ying... I told you so.”

And darkness took him.

*Wei Wuxian opened his eyes. Above him, the sky was blue and clear, and beneath him, the grass was soft. He could hear laughter floating up towards him, and he gazed down to where his family had gathered to shoot kites.*

*Well, Jiang Cheng, Wen Ning, Jinling, Zizhen, and Jingyi were shooting kites - A-Yuan and Sizhui were wading in the creek, hand in hand under Lan Zhan's watchful eye, while Shijie, Wen Qing and Popo drank tea nearby. Wei Wuxian smiled, happiness filling every part of him as he watched his family have fun, as he watched Lan Zhan turn to face him.*

*Lan Zhan looked up, and smiled at him.*

*And a tear of blood ran down Lan Zhan's cheek. Wei Wuxian gasped, sitting up, but even as he did a bead of red appeared on Lan Zhan's robes, above his abdomen, and before Wei Wuxian's eyes it grew, and grew, and grew, blood soaking through every part of his robes, and a rain of arrows came down from the sky and made straight for his family and –*

A hand squeezed his, hard, and Wei Wuxian gasped, his eyes flying open, before immediately blinking against the bright light.

“Lan Zhan –” he gasped, and somewhere beside him someone scoffed.

“Do I look like Hanguang Jun?”

“A-Cheng,” he breathed, blinking the room into view and turning towards the sound of his brother's voice. “What – what-”

“Easy,” murmured Jiang Cheng, his voice softer this time. His hand squeezed Wei Wuxian's again, and Wei Wuxian gripped it back. “It's alright. Everyone's fine.”

Wei Wuxian stared at his brother for a long moment. He was sitting on the edge of Wei Wuxian's bed, and he looked tired, and a little dishevelled, and there were tears sparkling in

his eyes, but he was smiling – a smile that made him look so young and so proud and so relieved and so *happy* that Wei Wuxian was a little taken aback, and he didn't understand, but –

Memory crashed down upon Wei Wuxian, sudden and shocking and *suffocating* – the plan, the operation, the –

The breath caught in his throat.

The empty space within him, the gnawing, aching hollow in his gut that he'd lived with for *years* now –

It was gone.

And in its place... in its *place* –

“Jiang Cheng,” he whispered, his voice rasping in his throat, and his brother's smile cracked open, growing brighter even as tears streamed down his cheeks, “Jiang Cheng, it...?”

“It worked,” Jiang Cheng whispered back, nodding. He rubbed his arm roughly over his face, brushing away his tears. “It worked, A-Xian.”

A mangled, laughing sob broke from Wei Wuxian's throat, and he pressed a hand to his gut, his fingers trembling. He had a golden core.

He had a golden core.

He could feel it – he could feel its warmth, its pulse, could feel the energy filling the spaces within him that had been barren and hollow for so long. It wasn't as strong as his own had been, he could feel that, too, and something about the flow of energy seemed a little uneven, but it was there.

It was there.

Jiang Cheng made a soft tutting sound and pulled Wei Wuxian upright, crushing him into a hug, and it was then that Wei Wuxian realised that he was sobbing, crying almost hysterically as his little brother pulled him close. The relief surging through him was too much, and there was nothing he could do to keep from sobbing as he clung desperately to Jiang Cheng, as he buried his face in his brother's shoulder.

“It's – it's-” he choked, but nothing more came out, and his sobs robbed the air from his lungs.

“I know,” Jiang Cheng murmured, sinking his fingers into Wei Wuxian's hair. “I know.”

“It's been so long,” rasped Wei Wuxian, clutching his brother tighter, curling further into his chest. “Jiang Cheng, Jiang Cheng, I didn't think – I didn't think I'd –”

“It's okay,” Jiang Cheng said gruffly as Wei Wuxian's words choked off once more. “It's okay, now. It worked. You're – it's back, Wei Wuxian. It's over now. It worked.”

It worked.

It *worked*.

Wei Wuxian wrenched in a shuddering breath, pulling back to study Jiang Cheng's face. "And the boys are all, they're all okay?"

Jiang Cheng rolled his eyes, punching Wei Wuxian in the shoulder. There was force behind it, as much as there always was between the two of them, but for the first time in years, Wei Wuxian didn't feel it. Tears sprung back into Wei Wuxian's eyes.

"I told you that, didn't I? Of course they're all alright. Their spiritual energy levels were still a little high at first, but by yesterday evening they'd levelled out, and the physical wounds are all but healed, too." At the look on Wei Wuxian's face, Jiang Cheng gave a weary smile. "You've been out for two days. You drifted in and out for a while, but I don't think you were ever really conscious. I don't think A-Jie or Lan Wangji would've slept at all if Wen Qing hadn't been so calm about it. She said it would take a little while for your body and your spirit to properly connect with the core, that it would be more likely to happen smoothly if you were unconscious."

"That makes sense," Wei Wuxian agreed, nodding slowly and glancing around the room. It wasn't his own – he was still in one of the medical buildings, but he recognised one of A-Yuan's little dolls lying on the pillow beside him. His heart twisted. "A-Yuan – is he okay? If it's been two days, what did you tell him? Is he freaking out?"

"He's fine," Jiang Cheng promised. "Lan Wangji insisted it would be best to tell him the truth – or part of it – so he knows that Wen Qing operated on you, and that you're going to be fine. He got a little upset, but he calmed down when we let him see you. That's where Lan Wangji is now, by the way – getting A-Yuan up and dressed. It's ridiculous – the last few days he's only left this room to put A-Yuan to bed and then go back and get him up in the morning. Utterly shameless, spending so much time with you when you're unmarried."

Wei Wuxian smiled as Jiang Cheng went on a rant about the impropriety that he and Lan Zhan apparently exhibited every day. Ever since the engagement, Jiang Cheng had increased his expressions of disgust, the other day scolding Wei Wuxian for smiling at Lan Zhan 'too flirtatiously,' but Wei Wuxian couldn't bring himself to mind, because he knew it was empty teasing.

Jiang Cheng had said nothing, ever, about the fact that Wei Wuxian and Lan Zhan were sharing a bed. He knew, Wei Wuxian knew that he knew, but he never mentioned it.

As if conjured by Jiang Cheng's words, Lan Zhan appeared at the door, his hand in A-Yuan's. The moment he saw Wei Wuxian his eyes widened, and he smiled just as brightly as Jiang Cheng, his eyes, too, filling with tears.

"Wei Ying-" he began, but he was cut off by A-Yuan's delighted cry of,

"A-Die, you're awake!"

Wei Wuxian laughed, holding out his arms, and at once A-Yuan ran across the room, scrambling up over Jiang Cheng's lap (Wei Wuxian was sure there must have been an easier way to get onto the bed, but Jiang Cheng had a hand on A-Yuan's back and a smile on his face, and he didn't seem to mind.) A-Yuan flung himself into Wei Wuxian's arms, and Wei Wuxian squeezed him until he squeaked, planting a kiss on the side of his son's cheek.

"Good morning, little radish. Have you been good for Baba while I've been asleep?"

A-Yuan nodded eagerly. "Baba's been teaching me songs to help you feel better! A-Yuan's been helping!"

"I'm sure you have," said Wei Wuxian seriously. "No doubt I'd still be asleep now if it wasn't for your playing." He let A-Yuan settle against his chest, glancing over his son's shoulder. Lan Zhan had come to the side of the bed to stand beside Jiang Cheng, who rolled his eyes.

"Sure, sure, I'll go and fetch Wen Qing, let you have your privacy for a minute. They're shameless, aren't they A-Yuan?"

"Shameless," agreed A-Yuan, nodding, and Wei Wuxian snickered.

Jiang Cheng stood up, but then hesitated, reaching down to squeeze Wei Wuxian's shoulder. "I can't wait to spar with you again, A-Xian."

"Me too," Wei Wuxian murmured, taking Jiang Cheng's wrist and squeezing it.

"I'll see you later," he promised. Then, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a small candy, slipping it to A-Yuan with a pantomime of secrecy.

"Break your legs, Cheng-shushu!" A-Yuan sang, beaming, as Lan Zhan's eyes moved up slightly, going as far as they ever would into an eye roll.

Jiang Cheng reached down to kiss A-Yuan's forehead and ruffle his hair, and then he was gone, and Lan Zhan sat in his place, reaching for Wei Ying's wrist. He pressed his fingers against his pulse, and closed his eyes, and Wei Wuxian smiled softly.

"Lan Zhan... Thank you."

Lan Zhan opened his eyes, shaking his head slightly.

"There is no need to thank me," he murmured fondly.

But Wei Wuxian took Lan Zhan's hand, squeezing it tightly. "Yes, there is. Without you, the fragments would have fallen apart before they could ever have formed a full core. Without you, it wouldn't have worked."

"The role could have been filled by another strong cultivator," said Lan Zhan, and Wei Wuxian shook his head.

"Lan Zhan... thank you."

A tear escaped Lan Zhan's eye, running down his cheek and catching on his lips as they quirked into a half-smile. "Anything, Wei Ying. Any time. I love you."

"I love you, too. I love you so much." Wei Wuxian leant forward, pressing his lips to Lan Zhan's, and the other man returned the kiss eagerly.

A-Yuan wiggled in Wei Wuxian's lap. "A-Die, Baba, I'm *squished!*" he protested, and Wei Wuxian could feel his tiny palm against his chest, trying to push them apart.

Laughing, Wei Wuxian pulled away from Lan Zhan, who was staring at him so lovingly Wei Wuxian thought he might just melt into the bed then and there.

"Better," A-Yuan said happily, grabbing onto Lan Zhan's long sleeve to play with the floating fabric. "I love A-Die and Baba too."

"We love you very much," said Wei Wuxian, kissing his head as Lan Zhan gave a sombre nod.

At that moment, Wen Qing arrived, and when she saw Wei Wuxian sitting up she smiled warmly.

"Finally," she said, striding over to the side of the bed and tugging his hand out of Lan Zhan's to take his pulse. "Wei Wuxian, why are you always so lazy, lying around for days at a time?"

"Qing-jiejie, A-Die's sick," A-Yuan said, sounding a touch offended. "He's only been sleeping because he's sick."

"I know," said Wen Qing, smiling and stroking A-Yuan's cheek gently. "I'm just teasing. But A-Die is not sick anymore. A-Die is all better. A lot better." She met Wei Wuxian's gaze, and to his horror he could see tears in Wen Qing's eyes. If she started crying, there would be no way he could get away from this conversation without bawling himself. To his relief, the doctor within her won out at first. "Now – it took a while for the core to bond with your body and your spirit. Longer than I expected, actually, but the progress has been steady, and smooth. There's no sign that the core will fragment again, and if it hasn't happened yet I don't think it will, but you *cannot* practise any cultivation until I give you permission. Do you understand me? No traditional cultivation, no demonic cultivation – no stupid middle ground you try to come up with as a loophole. Nothing. I want you to meditate on your golden core for half an hour every day, and that is it. Nothing else until I tell you to, okay? We need to make sure it's stable before we test your limits."

"I promise," Wei Wuxian said, nodding at her and wrapping an arm around A-Yuan to show that he was serious. Wen Qing's sharp expression smoothed back into a smile, and she reached out, putting a hand on his cheek.

"You did well, Wei Wuxian," she murmured.

"Thank you, Qing-jie," he replied, and once again tears sparkled in her eyes as she smiled. "For everything. I mean it."

She shook her head, drawing back her hand and standing up. “Compared to all you have done for us-”

“Let’s not go into that,” Wei Wuxian said, grimacing slightly. “Please. We both know we’re never going to agree on which one of us has done more. So let’s not argue about it, okay?”

“Okay,” Wen Qing sighed, but she was shaking her head.

“It is not my business, but from what I can see neither of you have given more than what is deserved,” said Lan Zhan quietly, his eyes on A-Yuan.

Wei Wuxian looked at Wen Qing, considering that. He could feel tears warm on his cheeks, but he could feel his own smile, too. For the first time in a long, long time, he really, truly, felt whole. He’d thought he had been hopeful before, but it was nothing compared to this.

He was safe. All of his Wen were safe.

He had a golden core.

It was more of a fresh start than he had ever dared to hope for, and as Wen Qing leant down to kiss his forehead, he knew that she agreed.

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading, please do let me know what you thought if you have the time and the inclination, and thank you for your patience!

Next chapter, I promise we'll get more of the juniors! Until then, please take care!



# Chapter 48

## Chapter Notes

Hey everyone! Thank you so much for all your lovely comments on the last chapter, and for your ongoing support! I'm so glad you're all enjoying this story! Apologies for the slight delay in the chapter - it's a bit of a monster in regards to word count so hopefully that makes up for it!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Jin Zixuan was exhausted.

It was a bone-deep exhaustion, a fatigue that hung heavy on his limbs and his head and his heart, and he wanted nothing more than to crawl into bed with Yanli and Jinling and Rulan, to cuddle close to his wife and his sons and sleep for a hundred years. If he thought about it, he grew frustrated at how weary his *body* felt – yesterday had been awful, but physically it wasn't like he had over-exerted himself. There was no reason for his legs to feel like lead, for his arms to weigh more than cities at his sides.

He forced himself to sit up, the inn's bed creaking beneath him, and dug the heels of his hands into his eyes. If he was to guess, he'd estimate he'd had perhaps four hours of sleep. For a cultivator of his strength, it should have been enough.

But yesterday they had reached the second orphanage, where there were supposed to be three of the Wen children. Instead, there they had found only one. According to the head of the orphanage, the other two had passed away just after arriving.

“They were so weak, Jin-gongzi,” he murmured, heartbreak in his voice. “The girl held on until morning, but the boy... he was too tired. All we could do was give them proper burials.”

Zixuan had nodded, and said that he understood, and asked to see the graves, that he might pay his respects. Huaisang took the surviving Wen child to meet the other two children they'd found in the first orphanage. They didn't recognise each other, but mercifully, they also seemed too young to recognise Zixuan's robes. They didn't scream at him, like A-Yuan had.

When they settled into the inn for the night, Zixuan had thought of the dead children, sobbed solidly for half an hour. Then, he had thrown up until there was nothing left within him but bile, grief, and fury.

He still felt empty now. Hollow.

He shuddered.

When he finally had slept, he'd dreamt of waking up at home in Jinlintai, of hearing Rulan crying, and walking into the nursery only to find the cot empty, his baby missing – he'd dreamt of running through town after town, unable to find his son anywhere, *always* able to hear him wailing.

A lump rose in Zixuan's throat, and his mind once again returned to Lanling. Before they had left, Nie Huaisang had tracked down the two babies that Meng Yao claimed had been adopted by families there. He reported that they had grown into happy and healthy toddlers, well-fed and apparently dearly loved. As such, he and Zixuan had agreed that it would be best to see if they could track down the babies' birth parents among the survivors of the Wen, and discuss the situation with them before they made any effort to move the children.

But Zixuan hadn't been able to stop thinking about it ever since.

On one hand, if Rulan was snatched from him to be raised by a family of strangers, there was nothing Zixuan would not do to bring him home. But on the other, they didn't know who the babies belonged to, whether their parents were even alive, and Zixuan couldn't help but think of A-Yuan. If a stranger came to Lotus Pier to rip A-Yuan away from Wei Wuxian and give him to birth parents that the boy couldn't remember, that couldn't be the right thing to do?

He didn't know. He didn't like not knowing – he felt like a child himself, lost and helpless, and he wished desperately that Yanli was with him. She would know what to do, or at least what to say to make Zixuan feel better. If Yanli was here, he could hold her close, and let someone comfort him as he cried about the atrocities his clan had carried out.

Also, if Yanli was here, Rulan and A-Ling could be here too, and he could keep them safe in his arms, he could chase away the dreams of their vanishing.

He wanted to fly back to Lotus Pier and fetch them, or maybe even let someone else take over the task of tracking down the Wen. Someone who would be better at it, who was better with people, and with children, and with tracking in general. Someone strong enough not to break apart alone in the dark.

But he couldn't. It was his duty, and he wouldn't walk away from it. He couldn't.

So he dragged himself up out of bed, and got himself dressed, taking his usual amount of care over his appearance and finding just a little comfort in the familiar motions. Then, when he was ready, he took himself downstairs to order breakfast, and prepare for another day of scouring unfamiliar streets for unfamiliar faces, while Nie Huaisang asked every man, woman, and canary he could find if they knew of any street children who may have appeared two years ago.

Just before they reached the second orphanage, they'd passed through the first town on the list where Meng Yao claimed to have left children to fend for themselves. They had found nothing. A few street vendors Huaisang had spoken to remembered noticing a pair of boys who seemed to match their meagre descriptions, but they all said they hadn't been seen in over a year.

“Wei Wuxian did tell us some street kids feel safer moving town to town,” Nie Huaisang had said glumly on their second night of searching, after they had walked every inch of the town twice, and found no sign of any street children.

Zixuan didn’t know how hopeful he felt about the rest of the towns to come. Already, they had crossed most of the places they *knew* the Wen to be off the list – they had visited both orphanages, and two of the three brothels. For Zixuan, the second brothel had actually been easier than the first – ironically, because it was more difficult. The Madam there was fiercely protective of the women who worked in her house, and it took nearly fifteen minutes for Zixuan and Huaisang to convince her that they had no intention of harming the Wen. Only when she had Zixuan’s written assurance that the women would be protected, marked with his seal, did she fetch them.

He’d hoped that the final brothel would be similar, but when he asked the Madam of the second what she knew of it, her face had darkened.

“Nothing good,” she had said. “Their practises are crude, and they care little for the women in their service. More pertinent to you, Jin-gongzi, is what I know of the Wen women there. I would know nothing, if not for a young woman who asked to pledge her service to my house about a year ago. She used to work for *that* place.” The final two words were pronounced like a curse. “She was thrown out for becoming with child. In any case, I accepted her service, and when she found out that some of her new sisters were Wen women, she was able to give an account of their kin in her previous house. According to her, two had passed away during her tenure there. From what I have heard, they were killed by diseases that any *reputable* house –” There, she had paused, her nostrils flaring for a moment, before she smoothed out her dress and sighed, clasping her hands before her. “It would not surprise me if you found they bought far more women from your disciples than any other house, Jin-gongzi. To them, women are disposable.”

According to his list, the final brothel had purchased eleven women in total. Jin Zixuan was *not* looking forward to that at all.

Between here and there, however, they had two more towns to visit. The first, they would easily reach today, especially if they left early, and if they were very lucky they might even make it to the second town, too. Though, given that they were travelling with Nie Huaisang, they might not leave the inn before noon.

As Zixuan entered the dining room, a pair of Nie disciples stood, bowing to him before disappearing up the stairs, no doubt to wake up their young master. Aside from a couple more disciples and a couple of early rising Wen women, the room was empty, so Zixuan ordered himself some breakfast and settled down to wait. It was strange, ordering himself breakfast. With the obvious exception of the war, he’d never travelled without a host of servants before, and they had always taken care of such things for him. Now, he was the only Jin among the group, and the Nie with them were very much disciples, and not servants. The only vaguely familiar thing about it was the fact that they had booked out the entire inn.

A faint blush of old shame heated his cheeks as he remembered doing the same in Caiyi, inadvertently leaving Yanli and her brothers without a place to stay. At the time, he thought

he would look like a fool for allowing them to stay when he had explicitly ordered the inn to be cleared. God, he had been a fool.

This time, it was a matter of practicality, and safety. The Nie disciples withstanding, with nine women and three children recovered so far, they were already a growing group, and there was always the possibility that someone could discover the identity of the Wen. It was unlikely they would be attacked directly – neither Huaisang nor Zixuan had been quiet about their identities, and there were a dozen strong fighters of the Nie sect with them. It should be enough to deter even the stupidest parties. Still, it was better to avoid confrontation.

As the waiter delivered Zixuan a truly terrible pot of tea with a low bow and a smile, Zixuan could almost hear Mianmian laughing at him.

Despite his apprehension, the Nie disciples were able to wrangle Nie Huaisang downstairs before too long, and another pair of them got the children awake, washed, and dressed. By the time everyone was fed and ready to go, it was barely midmorning, and Zixuan felt a little hopeful.

For about an hour.

Until they reached the next town. It was small, small enough to search in a few short hours, and they found no children on the street there at all. Of the people they spoke to, a few were irate that the rich gentry would think of their town so poorly they'd assume the townsfolk would let children starve on the street, and others recalled vaguely a pair of dark clad children who hid in the shadows of the alley ways for a few months, before disappearing. No one could tell them where the children had gone.

The children weren't there now.

With a heavy heart and nausea in his stomach, Zixuan agreed that they should move on. By the time they reached the second town the sun was beginning to set, so the entire group headed for an inn, buying out the entire place and handsomely paying the two guests it had been housing to go elsewhere.

As they sat down for dinner, Huaisang spoke casually to the waiter. "Have you lived here long, sir?"

"All my life, gongzi," the waiter said, bowing his head as he put placed some truly delicious smelling dishes on the table.

Huaisang nodded, glancing up at him. "We're looking for three children that might've been abandoned around here, around two years ago. Do you know where we might look?"

The waiter frowned slightly. "Well... most often children with nowhere to go make their way to the temple. The monks there take care of them. So, I'd start there, but there's also an abandoned barn outside of town. Homeless folk have been known to take shelter there, and I heard recently someone saw a couple of kids there. Little ones," he added, holding his hand up to roughly Xuanyu's height. "One of the monks from the temple went out to look for them, but he couldn't find anyone there."

Zixuan thanked the waiter absently, staring at Huaisang.

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” Nie Huaisang asked quietly, and Zixuan frowned suspiciously. The last time he had asked Huaisang that question, the other man had said, “Porn?” with so innocent an expression it took Zixuan a moment to realise what he’d said. Then, his cheeks had burnt red, and Nie Huaisang had cackled for nearly a solid minute.

“I don’t know what *you’re* thinking,” Zixuan said. “But I think we should go to the barn tonight. If they are in the temple they’re safe enough to wait until morning, but according to the list, the children left here were between four and six years old. They’re still *babies*. If they’re outside, and alone, we should find them.”

“You could’ve just said yes,” said Huaisang, taking a big bite of dinner. “That’s what I was thinking.”

“Yes, well,” said Zixuan, rolling his eyes. “I’ve learnt my lesson.”

One of the nearby Nie disciples gave him a sympathetic look, before turning her attention to Nie Huaisang. “If you wish, gongzi, I will hold a few disciples back here to ensure our guests are all settled.”

“Thank you, Rushi,” said Huaisang, still stuffing his face. Zixuan rolled his eyes again, taking a couple of steamed buns from the table and wrapping them up, tucking them into his robes, just in case.

“I really think we should go now,” he said pointedly. “It’s getting dark.”

Huaisang pouted up at him, cheeks full like a hamster. Beside him, Nie Rushi laughed delicately.

“On second thoughts, if you wish, gongzi, I will go in your stead, and you can remain here.”

Huaisang swallowed, pointing his chopsticks at her. “Excellent idea! This is why you’re my favourite, Rushi.”

In all, four disciples accompanied Zixuan. They quickly found someone to give them directions to the abandoned barn, and by the time they reached it, the setting sun was almost entirely hidden by the horizon, painting the sky with pinks and reds that reminded Zixuan of lotus flowers.

He missed Yanli so much it ached.

The barn was indeed old – it was falling apart. There was a great gaping hole on one side of the roof, and the door was hanging off its hinges. Someone had pulled what looked to be an old drinking trough across the doorway. Zixuan stepped towards it, but as he did someone moved inside, a small figure clambering over the trough carefully, her back to them.

Then she turned, and the blood drained from her face so quickly she was paler than the moon. Eyes fixed on Zixuan, she drew in a strangled gasp, and then she flung her arms out wide, blocking the doorway, and *screamed*.

“Run! A-Xia, A-Xia, *run*, go, go *now*, run, *run*!”

“It’s alright!” Zixuan said quickly, holding up his hands, but then he remembered he was holding his sword and he cursed silently, putting it quickly on the floor.

“Don’t come any closer!” the girl yelled, her voice shaking almost as badly as she was, but her chin jutted up, and her arms stayed strong out at her sides.

“Okay, I won’t!” said Zixuan, his heart racing against his ribcage. Horror and guilt were fighting with wonder and relief inside his chest, because this girl looked terrified of him, which meant – which hopefully meant –

They’d *found* one of the children, and based on the way she was screaming, maybe two.

Zixuan knelt down quickly, pushing his sword out of reach and holding up his hands again. “I won’t come closer,” he promised. “No one will come closer. We just want to talk to you.”

The girl’s lip trembled, and tears welled in her eyes. Behind her, there was another flicker of movement, and then an even smaller voice let out a wordless sob. Another tiny figure leapt over the water trough and collided with the first girl, hugging her tightly from behind and keening into her back, and the girl gasped.

“No,” she whispered, one hand reaching back to grasp the child behind her, even as her other arm remained flung out protectively. “A-Xia, A-Xia, run!”

With a sob, the smaller child, A-Xia, shook her head, peeking out at Zixuan with heartache and terror in her eyes.

“Please,” A-Xia choked, her voice rasping as though it ached. “Please...”

“I’m not going hurt you, either of you,” said Zixuan as earnestly as he could. “I promise. I know – I know that people in my clan have hurt you before. I know why you’re scared. But I promise, I don’t want to hurt you at all. Would you please sit, so that we can talk? We’ve brought food...”

The girls did not move, rooted to the spot. The older girl was staring with wide-eyed suspicion at Zixuan, but little A-Xia –

A-Xia’s eyes were empty. Hopeless. Her lips were moving in a repeated plea, but no words were coming out, and it looked like she’d already given up.

“I’m here to help you,” Zixuan said quietly, reaching into his robes and pulling out the steamed buns. There were three, in total, and he leant forward as far as he could without moving his knees, resting the cloth on the floor, and the buns a top of it. “There.”

The older girl’s eyes snapped down, somehow going even wider at the sight of the food. The buns were still warm, steaming curling up from them into the chill of the evening. A-Xia’s eyes moved down too, and she licked her chapped lips before pursing them tightly, and hiding her face once again in the older girl’s back.

Once again, Zixuan found himself wishing for Yanli or Mianmian. They would know what to say to make them feel better, to make them comfortable – hell, even Huaisang would be better than he was, given that the sight of his robes wouldn't remind them of a monster.

But they weren't here, and the Nie disciples were hanging back and frozen in place, so he took a deep breath, and tried to remember what the words he'd planned before.

"My name is Jin Zixuan," he said carefully. "Recently, I was told that my father and some other people in my clan have done some truly awful things. I think you know some of the things I'm talking about. Because they were so bad, my friends and I are investigating to make sure all the bad men in my clan get punished for what they did. And, we want to make sure that the people my clan have hurt are safe, and protected."

Her little eyes still blank, A-Xia glanced up at the older girl, who was giving Zixuan a look of disbelief that was so much like Mianmian he smiled slightly.

"I understand why you wouldn't believe me. But I believe it was my brother that brought you here – I don't think he told you his name, but I think it was him. He is... he is clever, but he is also very silly, sometimes. He should have brought you somewhere safe – instead, he decided that somewhere 'less dangerous' would be better. I'm sorry. But I'm trying to fix it. Please, eat. I promise it's not poisoned." He paused. "According to my brother, there were three of you left here – there was a boy, too. Is that right?"

The older girl blinked, and then gave a fraction of a nod.

"Is he here too?" Zixuan asked, his heart leaping, but the girl shook her head.

"He – he heard –" she broke off, and then shook her head again, clamping her mouth shut. She looked like an arrow about to spring from a bow, pulled taught and quivering with anticipation, and Zixuan tried not to panic.

If the two girls fled, they would be easy to catch, but he didn't *want* to chase them or catch them.

"Please don't run," he said gently. "No one is going to hurt you, I promise. And we don't want to hurt the boy, either." He paused, trying to think about how to make them less afraid.

*"You have to remind them that you're human, too,"* Mianmian had told him once at Cloud Recess, when trying to convince him to befriend some of the other clan heirs. At the time, every part of the conversation seemed ridiculous to Zixuan, but it was the only thing he could think to try now.

"As I said, my name is Jin Zixuan," he said, thinking carefully. "I know that the people you've met that you know as 'Jin-gongzi' are bad people, so if you like, you can call me Jin-shushu. I have a wonderful wife called Jiang Yanli, and she grew up in a place called Lotus Pier. It's very beautiful there, and it's very safe – my brother-in-law Jiang Cheng is head of the Jiang Clan, and he's very good at it. Everyone in Lotus Pier is safe, when he's there. Yanli and I have a baby, called Rulan. He's very little, still – he's not even two months old, yet. But I think he is perfect. I have two little brothers-" *And probably more, and at least one secret*

*sister*; he thought glumly, before quickly shoving that thought away in the back of his brain for now. “-one who you’ve met, who is... complicated. But I also have a xiao-didi called Xuanyu – he’s not much bigger than you, though he’s nine now. I only met him recently. I like... I like cultivation, and I like poetry, and I don’t like gardening *at all*, but I did build a Lotus Pond for my wife, because I love her very much.”

As he rambled on, the older girl’s arm slowly, *slowly*, lowered. She unwrapped A-Xia’s arms from her waist, and then darted forward, snatching one of the buns from the ground before sprinting back up towards the barn, her chest heaving. Zixuan just smiled.

“You can come back for more if you like it,” he said. “It’s not as good as Yanli’s cooking, but they’re tolerable.”

The older girl pulled a small piece of the bun off, chewing it cautiously. She blinked, as though surprised, staring down at the food for a long moment, before ripping it in half, passing the larger portion carefully to A-Xia, who ate wolfishly.

“Careful,” Zixuan said automatically. “If you eat too quickly, you’ll give yourself indigestion.” He let them eat in peace, until both girls were licking their fingers clean, and then he spoke softly. “Can I ask what your names are? How old are you both?”

Breathing in sharply, the older girl said, “I am A-Xing. This is A-Xia. I am eight. She’s six.”

“Thank you for telling me,” said Zixuan nodding. “It’s lovely to meet you. Do you remember your family name?”

A-Xia flinched, and A-Xing’s jaw tightened. “The man said we must forget it, or else we will be taken back.”

“To Qiongqi?” Zixuan asked, paling. “You will never have to go back there. Never. There’s no camp there anymore, and there never will be again.” He paused. “If you are willing, I would like to take you both to Lotus Pier. All of the Wen we know who survived the camps are there. Some of them were rescued by my brother-in-law, and some of them we’re fetching now. But I understand why you don’t trust me, so how about we talk about Lotus Pier, here and now? You take the buns, and – here...” Zixuan pulled off his cape, scrunching it up and tossing it gently across the distance between them. “Wrap up so you don’t get cold. And I’ll tell you all about Lotus Pier, and you can make up your mind if you want to come or not. Okay?”

And slowly, hesitantly, A-Xing nodded.

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All in all, the last three weeks had been the most difficult days of Jin Zixuan’s life. Even the Sunshot Campaign had not drained him like this. Even when they lost battle after battle to Wen Ruohan’s puppets, and Zixuan was weighed down by hopelessness and grief, he had not sunk quite so low as this. He had not felt like such a failure – then, he had known that there would always be another battle, that he would keep fighting until they won the war, or until he died.



But now...

Now, they were almost back at Lotus Pier, and of the twenty-three children Meng Yao had smuggled out of the camps, Zixuan had found only nine of them.

Less than half.

Three, they knew for certain were dead. Two, the orphanage had told them of, and that was hard enough, but the third... The third child died had succumbed to illness on the streets, and they were told this by his nine-year-old brother. All three were lives that Zixuan mourned, three children he had never met, but he knew their memory would haunt him forever.

Along with those they couldn't find.

Zixuan knew that it was highly likely that some of those children were dead too. After a few days, A-Xing had decided to trust Zixuan enough to tell him that Wen Bo, the boy who had been left with them, had heard the rumours of the Yiling Patriarch and his army of Wen. He had set out to find them.

Zixuan knew only too well that he hadn't arrived.

Since meeting A-Xing and A-Xia, Zixuan hadn't worn his clan robes once. Instead, he had purchased several sets of simple, nondescript clothes (Huaisang claimed they were still very fancy) that tied him to no clan at all. It felt strange to walk around in anything other than gold – so strange he almost felt naked, but it was infinitely better than seeming a threat. It had taken over an hour of talking to coax A-Xing and A-Xia back to the inn, and it was only when they had spent the night with the Wen women and children that they stopped looking like they were about to run. Zixuan never, ever wanted a child to be so afraid of him again.

He would have walked around town in his underrobes if that was what it took.

The shame of that couldn't be greater than the guilt of finding *less than half* of the Wen children. Still, despite Zixuan's failure, the grand total of street children they were bringing back to Lotus Pier was actually sixteen. Seven of them, he knew, had never had anything to do with the Wen, but some had been friends with the other Wen children and others – others were just... alone.

If Zixuan had learnt anything on his travels, it was that there were far more children living on the streets nowadays. It was a lingering after effect of the war, an influx of orphans whose families had been utterly destroyed, and it hurt Zixuan's heart to see all of them. Most of them were skinny, some even emaciated, and they were filthy and infested with lice and covered in scrapes and bruises, and Zixuan's stomach burnt with the knowledge that before, he had never given them so much as a single thought.

That had changed now. Everything had changed now. Zixuan had made a vow to never shut his eyes again, and this seemed a very good place to start.

So, everyone who wanted to was coming back with him. If Jiang Cheng didn't want the seven who had nothing to do with the Wen, Zixuan would bring them back to Jinlintai,

though the thought of bringing any child into his clan as it was now made him uncomfortable.

It was a great relief when they reached Yunmeng. Soon, he would be able to talk about it with Yanli, to talk about *everything* with Yanli. He would be able to hold her, would be able to clutch his sons close, and see Xuanyu, and there was no way that could not make him feel at least a little better.

As they neared the entrance to Lotus Pier, Zixuan halted the carriages so that each one of the women and children could walk into Lotus Pier of their own volition, so that they could see where it was they were going.

Immediately, a now-familiar girl took Zixuan's hand, looking up at him with curious eyes. "Is this really there, Jin-shushu?"

Zixuan smiled despite himself, nodding down at A-Xing. Despite the fact that most of the children greatly preferred Huaisang (Zixuan blamed it almost entirely on the fact that Nie Huaisang bribed them all with sweets, toys, and stories) both A-Xing and A-Xia had taken a shine to Zixuan instead – once their initial fear had faded.

He had to be doing something right if A-Xing was comfortable enough to fall asleep in his arms, while A-Xia used his lap as a pillow, drooling onto his robes as she snored.

"This is Lotus Pier," he said, nodding. He was about to point out the gate, but at that moment A-Xia appeared at his other side and grabbed a hold of his hand. Her free thumb was stuck firmly in her mouth, and she was staring at Lotus Pier with soulful eyes.

He hadn't actually heard A-Xia say a single word since after desperate cries of 'please' the night that they met, and Zixuan thought he'd seen her sucking her thumb more often than not. At five years old, she was probably a little old for it, but Zixuan had already scolded two of the other children for pointing that out.

Wen Anjing had told him the night they found A-Xing and A-Xia that she knew their parents were dead. That she had watched them die – that A-Xing and A-Xia had, too. The two girls had gone through unimaginable trauma, and if that meant A-Xia constantly sucked her thumb, so be it. Hopefully, they'd be able to help her grow out of it, help all of the children move past the horrors that war and Jin Guangshan's greed had inflicted on them, but in the meantime Zixuan did not think it was anyone else's place to tell them how to cope.

"Wow..." A-Xing breathed, her eyes widening. "It's so pretty, Jin-shushu."

"It is," Zixuan agreed, smiling slightly. "I told you."

"Yep... There's a lot of water, though," said A-Xing, a little sceptically. "What if there's a big storm and everything floods and gets washed away?"

Zixuan paused, frowning slightly. "I don't know."

“Perhaps you should ask Jiang-zongzhu,” she said seriously. “Just in case. A-Xia doesn’t like boats.”

A-Xia nodded once, and then made a little hum that sounded like an addition.

“She does like lotuses, though,” A-Xing said, and A-Xia nodded twice, smiling a little around the thumb in her mouth. “They’re her favourite.”

“They’re A-Li’s favourite, too,” Zixuan said, smiling at A-Xia. For a moment, she smiled back, but then she looked ahead and gave a small whimper, stopping in her tracks. She wasn’t the only one – several of the women and children walking around them froze where they stood, and Zixuan glanced up.

The gates to Lotus Pier were wide open, and within them Zixuan could see that Jiang Cheng had gathered his disciples to greet them. Before the disciples, however, stood a group of the Wen of the Burial Mounds, looking anxiously out at the nearing group.

Zixuan crouched down beside A-Xia, looking her in the eye. “It’s a big group of people, isn’t it?” A-Xia nodded, her hand tightening around Zixuan’s thumb, and quite possibly cutting off the circulation. “Don’t worry. They are all friends. You are safe here. I have promised it before, and I’ll promise it again.” He turned slightly to meet A-Xing’s nervous eyes, too. “Do you understand?”

Both girl’s nodded, and A-Xing whispered a “Yes, Jin-shushu,” and Zixuan led them on. A-Xia stayed very close to his side, and A-Xing’s grip grew tighter and tighter as they moved to the head of the group.

Jiang Cheng came out to meet them, nodding at Zixuan and Huaisang with a weary smile, before turning to face the small crowd.

“Welcome to Lotus Pier,” he said sombrely. “Yunmeng Jiang offers you sanctuary here, should you wish to accept it. We have arranged some temporary rooms for you for now – there are more detailed plans for the long run, but I am sure you are all weary from travelling. Those plans can be shared after you’ve bathed, eaten, and rested. Please, come in.”

Zixuan couldn’t help but glance over the Wen as Jiang Cheng spoke. The women looked faintly disbelieving, while the children mostly seemed confused, but when Zixuan followed Jiang Cheng inside, they followed him too.

Once inside, Zixuan stepped to the side, and almost at once Wen Yingyue, the first woman Zixuan had spoken to at the Burial Mounds, gave a cry, breaking free from the crowd to launch herself at her sisters. The ice broken, another man ran forward, holding out his arms to one of the young boys. Another woman from the Burial Mounds, once Zixuan hadn’t met, fell to her knees, and two of the older children flung themselves at her.

But as much as Zixuan’s heart soared at the reunions, it sank as he looked at the children gazing over the crowd, tears in their eyes as they failed to see their parents. As he looked at the adults who gazed over the children he’d brought back, whose faces crumpled as they saw that their children were not among them.

As A-Xing and A-Xia clutched tighter to his hands.

“You’ve done well,” said Jiang Cheng quietly, and Zixuan shook his head.

“Less than half,” he muttered, and his brother-in-law put a hand on his shoulder.

“It’s a start,” he said, and then he grimaced. “Uh, before you do anything else, you – you probably want to go and see A-Jie and A-Ling.”

“Why?” Zixuan asked at once, looking sharply at his brother-in-law’s face. He was still grimacing, looking a little guilty and uncomfortable, but he didn’t look afraid so –

“Jinling might’ve been a little unwell at one point, but he’s alright now! A-Jie will explain everything,” Jiang Cheng said quickly, and Jin Zixuan took a deep breath, counting to three. Then, he looked down at the girls at his side.

“I need to go and see A-Li,” he said. “But this is my brother-in-law, Jiang Cheng. Remember all the stories I told you about him?”

“Jiang-zongzhu,” A-Xing said, and A-Xia giggled shyly around her thumb.

“Exactly. You two may wait here with him – he will look after you, and I shall see you later, alright?”

The two girls nodded sombrely as Jiang Cheng blinked, staring incredulously at Zixuan, but Zixuan was already passing shifting the girls’ grip onto him instead.

“Where are they?”

“A-Jie’s rooms,” said Jiang Cheng. “Wait, Zixuan, I’m busy-”

Without a word, Zixuan turned, striding as swiftly as he could through Lotus Pier. He didn’t care if Jiang Cheng was busy – if Jinling had been sick, someone should have told him.

It took all his self-control to knock, rather than just burst through the door of his wife’s rooms, but thankfully Jinling opened the door almost at once.

“A-Die,” he said, grinning, but there was guilt in his eyes, and Zixuan took his shoulders quickly, studying Jinling’s face.

“What happened?” he demanded. “Jiang Cheng said you were sick? When? Are you still ill? How –”

“A-Xuan, breathe,” said Yanli softly, coming to his side and kissing his cheek, but she looked guilty, too, and his gut curled. “Come, sit down. You must be tired.”

“I don’t want to sit down,” said Zixuan, his anxiety growing. “What is going on?”

“Well,” said Jinling slowly, scuffing his foot on the floor. “Wen Qing found out why we all had so much spiritual energy – when we were sent back, fragments of the cores of the people

that sent us got stuck inside us, too.”

“Okay,” said Zixuan slowly. “And...?”

“Well,” repeated Jinling, “she might’ve figured it out because... because I might’ve had a qi deviation.”

Zixuan’s blood ran cold, so cold it froze his entire body in place. “What?” he whispered, and Jinling looked up at him, wincing.

“I’m okay!” he promised. “It – it was horrible and scary, but it’s over, and it’s okay, and Wen Qing did surgery on all of us to get the core fragments out and put them into Wei Wuxian instead so he could have a golden core again, so it’s all fine! And it won’t happen again.”

Zixuan shook his head, digging his fingers into Jinling’s shoulders. “You – you had a qi deviation? *When?*”

“About two weeks ago,” Jinling admitted, and Zixuan’s head span.

“Why – why didn’t you tell me?” he looked at A-Li desperately, shaking his head. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because you would have come back,” said Yanli quietly. “Wen Qing was keeping A-Ling and the others safe. We did not want to worry you.”

“Of course, I would’ve come back!” Zixuan said, his voice catching in his throat even as it rose towards a shout. “You’re my son, I – I deserve to know if you – if you – how could you not tell me?”

“We knew you would be upset,” said Yanli, her voice trembling slightly. There were tears in her eyes, and he could read on her face how bad the qi deviation had been, how afraid she’d been, and he closed his eyes. “But A-Xuan, there was nothing you could do here, and – and what you were doing is important.”

“I know it is!” Zixuan said, sharper than he meant to.

Jinling flinched.

Zixuan swallowed, and sighed, taking his hands from Jinling’s shoulders to pull him into a hug instead. “Don’t you ever, ever keep something like that from me again, do you understand? Something of that magnitude, you send a butterfly – or you get someone else to do it.”

“Okay, A-Die,” agreed Jinling quickly, hugging him back, and Zixuan stared over his head at A-Li, shaking his head slightly. Then, he stiffened.

“Wait – what do you *mean* ‘so Wei Wuxian could have a golden core?’”

Yanli winced slightly. “It was not only you that didn’t know, A-Xuan. I didn’t know until that night in the Burial Mounds – it’s what he told A-Cheng and I, while you were outside. Wen

Qing transplanted A-Xian's core into A-Cheng, after Wen Zhuliu crushed his."

As Zixuan's mind reeled, Rulan began to cry over in the crib, and Yanli put a hand on Jinling's arm.

"A-Ling, will you fetch him for me?"

Jinling nodded, squeezing Zixuan extra tight for a moment before darting away to get the baby, and as he did, Yanli stepped forward, wrapping her arms around Zixuan's neck.

"I'm so sorry, A-Xuan," she breathed, her lips close to his ear. "I just – on top of every else, I – I couldn't... I couldn't deal with your fear on top of ..."

Zixuan sighed heavily, holding her close and kissing her forehead. "A-Li... Do you not think I could've helped you carry yours? We're a team, are we not?" Yanli glanced up, looking almost surprised at that, and Zixuan fought not to sigh. "Forget it. It's fine."

"A-Xuan..." Yanli paused as Jining returned with the baby, and Zixuan held out his hands for his younger son.

Rulan stopped crying almost immediately as Zixuan cuddled him close, pressing a kiss to his soft little head. It did a little to heal the aching guilt and grief that had clawed into Zixuan's chest over the past few weeks. But only a little.

He sighed, shaking his head slightly. "I'm tired," he said. "I think I'll take a bath before dinner."

"Of course," said Yanli, touching his arm. "We'll go and see what help Jiang Cheng needs – we wanted to speak to you in private first."

"Thank you," said Zixuan wearily.

If he'd hoped a hot bath would help, he was wrong. He felt better physically for it, but emotionally he was just as weary as ever, and now on top of everything else, he was trying to focus on the fact that Jinling, *his son*, had undergone a qi deviation, and then surgery, and Zixuan *hadn't been there*.

It made him feel a little sick. He took a deep breath, settling down on the bed to meditate – and then there was a small knock on the door.

*Give me strength...*

"Come in," he called, teeth only slightly gritted, but then he saw the face that poked inside, and he couldn't help but smile slightly. "Xuanyu! How are you?"

"Good, thank you," Xuanyu said, coming inside with a little smile. However, he looked nervous, and something turned in Zixuan's stomach. If his little brother was coming in here with more bad news, he wasn't sure how he was going to take it. "Da-ge... I'm sorry, I know you just got back, and I – I don't want to be a nuisance, but... but..."

“But what?” Zixuan patted the bed beside him, and Xuanyu sat down beside him, not quite meeting his eyes. “What’s wrong?”

Xuanyu took a deep breath, and then looked up. “Are Jinling, Jingyi, Sizhui and Jin Guangyao from the future?”

Shock hit Zixuan like a dart to the centre of his chest, and the only word he managed to stammer out was, “*What?*”

Xuanyu swallowed, glancing down again. “Before, before you went away, I heard Jinling calling you A-Die, and, Rulan’s courtesy name is Jin Ling but everyone only calls him Rulan, and sometimes Wei Wuxian calls Sizhui ‘A-Yuan,’ but his son’s called A-Yuan too, and the little Lan boy, A-Yu, he calls Jingyi ‘Big Me.’ There, there’re also two Jin Guangyaos and, and I know you said they were twins but if they’re twins why is it their surname that’s different? Also... some... some of the things that Jin Guangyao said, about, about me, it didn’t make sense – but it might, if, maybe, he was from the future.”

Zixuan opened his mouth, and then closed it, then opened it again. And closed it again. How – how had a *nine-year-old* child figured out – but then perhaps Xuanyu’s age had helped. Time-travel was a much more plausible explanation when you were a child, with a child’s imagination, and no concept of just how impossible something like time travel should be.

Despairing silently at the number of people who now knew, Zixuan took a deep breath, and nodded.

“Xuanyu, what I tell you here cannot leave this room – do you understand me? It’s very important...” When Xuanyu nodded, Zixuan sighed, and continued. “Yes, they came from the future. Zizhen, too. It was a spell that can never be cast again – it required a tool that’s since been destroyed. But it did send Jin Guangyao, Jinling, Sizhui, Jingyi and Zizhen back in time, yes. Because of that, a lot of bad things that would have happened now never will. Meng Yao... the younger one, that is, he... he has done bad things, Didi, I won’t lie to you. But he is not nearly as bad as Jin Guangyao, and we’re going to do our best to keep it that way.” He paused, taking Xuanyu’s hand and squeezing it. “One of the reasons it must be a secret is because we don’t want people to fixate on the future that they came from. It doesn’t exist anymore, and it never will. Not as it was. Jin Guangyao is gone, and that future is nothing more than a memory.”

Xuanyu nodded slowly, but then he swallowed, and looked fearfully up at Zixuan. “I died, didn’t I? In that future? Jin Guangyao, he, he said maybe this time I wouldn’t have to die which means that last time I... died? Is it because of what I became? Did I become a monster?”

“What? No, of course not! What are you talking about, Xuanyu?” Zixuan asked, as gently as he could. It was hard to keep his own voice from trembling. “What did he say to you?”

Xuanyu’s eyes filled with tears and he swallowed. “He, he said... he said that the only reason Wei Wuxian would take me to Lotus Pier was to stop me from what I became before, and – and I didn’t understand because it didn’t make sense but if – but if I was a monster –”

“You were not,” Zixuan said firmly, bending down to take his brother’s hands, squeezing them tightly. “Xuanyu, look at me. You were never a monster, or anything close to that. Never.” He paused for a long time, sorting through his words. “In that other future, Xuanyu, some very bad things happened. And some very bad things happened to *you*. In that time, I died before I had a chance to meet you, and after I passed, you were brought to Jinlintai. But it wasn’t – our father is not a good man, Xuanyu. Life was hard for you, and you got hurt. What you became... you became sad, Xuanyu. Sad and hurt and lonely. But we’re not going to let that happen again, alright? I’m here now, and if anything did happen to me you would still have Yanli, and Jiang Cheng and Wei Wuxian would look after you and your mother too, okay? Wei Wuxian came to get you because you never deserved to be treated the way your family treated you, or the way you were treated in Jinlintai in the other time. But you were *never* any sort of monster. I want you to get that thought out of your head right now. Do you understand?”

Tears dribbling down his cheeks, Xuanyu sniffed and nodded. “You – you d-died, Da-ge?”

“Yes, but it’s alright. We’ve avoided that, Jinling fixed it,” Zixuan promised, squeezing Xuanyu’s hands.

His brother swallowed. “I... I did die, too, didn’t I?”

A lump rose in Zixuan’s throat, and he wanted to lie, but with those grey eyes staring so soulfully at him he found he couldn’t. “Yes. But I promise you, Xuanyu, that future is gone now. It’s gone. You’re never going to be in that sort of danger. I can’t – I can’t promise that I will never die, just as I can’t promise that you will never die, and I can’t promise that one day the sun won’t rise in the west. But I do promise that there are so many people now to protect you, and care for you. You’re free now, Xuanyu. You’re going to be okay. I promise.”

With a little sob, Xuanyu let himself tumble forward against Zixuan’s chest, his skinny arms wrapping around him, and Zixuan cuddled him close. “Da-ge...”

“I’m here,” Zixuan promised, closing his eyes. “I’m here.”

Zixuan was exhausted.

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! I hope you enjoyed this chapter! Please do let me know what you thought if you have the time and the inclination to, I adore reading your comments! Until next time, please take care x

EDITED NOTE: I know I promised more juniors in this chapter and we only got a tiny bit of Jinling, but Jin Zixuan had too many feelings!!! In the NEXT chapter we will definitely get more juniors, I promise!!! XD



# Chapter 49

## Chapter Notes

Hi everyone! Thank you for all your lovely comments! Sorry for the delay with this one, but I have made it a super long one to make up for it! I hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It was harder than Wei Wuxian had anticipated, standing back at the edge of the courtyard and watching Jiang Cheng welcome the Wen to Lotus Pier. Wei Wuxian knew it would be an emotional day, and he had prepared for it (according to Wen Qing, he had been too much of a mother-hen to his Wen in the last couple of days, but she was the only one complaining.) He had been anticipating the tears that snuck out of his eyes when families were reunited, and when parents searched the small crowd for children who weren't there. He was ready when A-Yuan called out shy hellos to a few cousins he recognised, his grip on Wei Wuxian's shirt so tight he heard the fabric start to tear.

He had expected the memories of the camp to resurface. That awful night, the stench of blood and rot and death in the rain... He had expected to be flung back into the memory of hearing the testimony of his Wen, recounting their trauma to Lan Qiren and Jin Zixuan. It was not easy, but he'd expected it, and he weathered it.

But he hadn't expected his memory to throw him back further.

He hadn't expected to watch Jiang Cheng speaking gently and earnestly to small, frightened children, and feel the ghost of Jiang Fengmian's hand around his own. He hadn't expected the memory to echo through him, tightening like a noose around his heart.

*They arrived at Lotus Pier by boat. Wei Ying had never been on a boat before, but he liked it. There was something fun about the way it rocked on the water, how smoothly and quickly it cut down the river. Jiang-shushu's hand was on Wei Ying's shoulder, almost the whole time, and he'd been telling the most wonderful stories. Stories about Mama and Baba, about the mischief and adventures they'd had with Jiang-shushu back before Wei Ying was even born. Listening to Jiang-shushu talking, Wei Ying thought he could picture Baba's face, thought he could hear his Mama's laugh.*

*Nerves fluttered in Wei Ying's stomach like fireflies as the boat hit the edge of the dock. Jiang-shushu said he was coming home, that this was where he would live now, but it seemed too good to be true. What if Jiang-shushu changed his mind? What if he decided Wei Ying wasn't as good as his Mama and Baba had been, and sent him away?*

*"Come," Jiang-shushu said, stepping gracefully onto the pier and holding out his hand to help Wei Ying up. When Wei Ying was safely on the pier, he didn't let go. "This is Lotus Pier,*

*A-Ying. This is where your father and I grew up."*

*Wonder began to fill Wei Ying's chest, so light and strong that somehow it chased the nerves away as Jiang-shushu led him through the most wonderful, beautiful place Wei Ying had ever seen. Whenever they passed someone, the person would bow to Jiang-shushu and smile at Wei Ying, and no one shooed him away or cursed in his face!*

*They were just heading into a beautiful hall with what was – without a doubt – the prettiest chair Wei Ying had ever seen when a sharp voice called out behind them. "Four months."*

*Jiang-shushu stiffened, turning around, and Wei Ying turned with him, staring wide eyed at the woman who had entered the hall behind them. She was very pretty, but she was glaring at Wei Ying worse than the street vendors ever had, and there was a ring on her hand that crackled with purple lightning when she met his eyes. Automatically, Wei Ying clutched tighter to Jiang-shushu's hand.*

*"Ziyuan," Jiang-shushu replied cordially, though there was a tension in his voice Wei Ying hadn't heard before.*

*"Four months, Fengmian," said the woman, striding forward. "You have been gone four months."*

*Jiang-shushu's hand tightened a little, and when he spoke, he sounded almost angry. "I was not gone for leisure, Ziyuan. This is Wei Ying. Wei Ying, this is my wife, Yu Ziyuan. You may call her-"*

*"Yu-furen," said Yu Ziyuan immediately, her razor-sharp eyes snapping onto Jiang-shushu. "Anything else I would take as great disrespect."*

*"Ziyuan-"*

*"Well, he is to be a disciple, is he not? A servant like his father? What else would he call me?"*

*"He will not be raised as a servant," said Jiang-shushu. "We will raise him as a young master, with A-Cheng. It would do A-Cheng good to have a shixiong."*

*The woman's eyes widened, the fury in them white hot and terrifying. "A shixiong?"*

*"Wei Ying is older."*

*"A-Cheng is your son! How can the son of a servant be his shixiong?" The woman's eyes narrowed, and her teeth bared almost like a wolf, and Wei Ying shrank back. "Unless of course Wei Ying is your-"*

*"Yu Ziyuan!" Jiang-shushu snapped, and Wei Ying flinched as Yu-furen drew herself up. Before she could speak, however, Jiang-shushu went on. "Whatever it is you think of Cangse Sanren – whatever it is you think I thought of her, Wei Changze was like a brother to me! You seem so keen to forget that! If I hadn't – They are dead, Ziyuan. They are gone. And A-Ying is now part of Yunmeng Jiang, and he is staying here."*

*Yu Ziyuan's lips were pursed so tightly they were deathly white, and she breathed out sharply through her nose. "Very well. He will be a ward. Nothing more. He will not address my children as jiejie or didi – he may call A-Li Shijie. A-Cheng – A-Cheng he will address as Jiang Cheng. There's no need to constantly remind A-Cheng that his father has made the son of a servant his shixiong."*

*"Very well," said Jiang-shushu tightly, and Yu Ziyuan turned on her heels, but then she paused, turning back.*

*"It would be strange for you to be seen calling him A-Ying, Fengmian. People will think he is your own child."*

*Wei Ying blinked, glancing at Jiang-shushu with nervous confusion. That didn't make much sense to him – A-Ying was his name. That was what Mama and Baba called him, what everyone called him. He didn't understand why it would be different with Jiang-shushu. But Yu-furen didn't explain it, and Jiang-shushu said nothing. After a moment, Yu-furen turned back and strode away, and Wei Ying let out a breath he hadn't realised he'd been holding.*

*And then he heard a whine that froze his blood –*

*And a bark –*

*He screamed, leaping at Jiang-shushu, who caught him with a grunt.*

*"Wei Ying!"*

*"Dogs!" Wei Ying wailed, scrambling as high up Jiang-shushu as he could, terror coursing through him so fiercely he thought he would be sick. "D-d-d – Jiang-shushu, Jiang-shushu don't let them get me, please, please!"*

*"It's alright," Jiang-shushu said soothingly, rubbing Wei Ying's back. "It's alright, I will get rid of the dogs. You're safe here, A-Xian. You're safe here. You are home."*

*"A-Die?" A-Yuan asked, a little nervously, and Wei Wuxian blinked back to the present looking down at his son.*

*"Huh?"*

*A-Yuan reached up hesitantly, patting Wei Wuxian's cheek. "Are you okay? Your eyes are faraway..."*

*Wei Wuxian smiled wryly, and kissed A-Yuan on the end of the nose. "I'm just fine, little radish. I was just distracted. Were you saying something?"*

*"Mn!" A-Yuan nodded, already sounding so much like Lan Zhan and Sizhui that Wei Ying's heart lifted. "A-Yuan's still staying with A-Die and Baba, right? Now all, all these cousins are back?"*

*"Definitely," said Wei Wuxian, planting dozens of feather light kisses on A-Yuan's cheeks and forehead until his son giggled and protested. "I told you, there's no getting rid of me,*

now. You're stuck with me forever and ever and ever."

"Good," said A-Yuan, leaning forward to kiss Wei Wuxian's cheek. He was significantly less graceful than Wei Wuxian, and it was just as much of a headbutt there as it was a kiss, but Wei Wuxian didn't mind.

"Wei-xiong, there you are!"

Wei Wuxian grinned, turning to face his friend. "Nie-xiong! Welcome back to Lotus Pier."

"Thank you," said Huaisang, waving his fan at A-Yuan. "Hello, A-Yuan."

A-Yuan smiled a little shyly and waved. "Hello, Nie-shushu."

Huaisang smiled, but there was a strain to it as he turned his attention to Wei Wuxian. "Wei-xiong, can I talk with you? In private?"

Suddenly, A-Yuan gave a little gasp. "Oh, is Nie-bobo here too?" he asked curiously, looking around the crowd.

"Nie-bobo?" Wei Wuxian raised his eyebrows. Apparently, Jiang Cheng's prediction that A-Yuan was an uncle magnet was coming true.

A-Yuan nodded sombrely. "Yi-gege says that Nie-bobo is sword brothers with Bobo, and because Bobo is Baba's brother that makes Nie-Bobo Baba's brother too! Which means he's A-Yuan's Nie-bobo."

"Sworn brother," Wei Wuxian corrected, slightly curious about what Jingyi had been teaching his son. "So is Xichen Lan-bobo? Or Xichen-bobo?"

"No," said A-Yuan firmly, shaking his head. "Just Bobo. Sizhui says Bobo is Bobo." Suddenly, A-Yuan seemed to regain his track of thought, and he looked back at Huaisang. "Yi-gege says that Nie-bobo's sword is so big A-Yuan could use it as a bed! Is that true, Nie-shushu?"

Huaisang tapped his fan against his chin. "You're probably small enough to lie on Baxia, yes, but I don't think she'd be a comfortable bed. At all. I wouldn't recommend it."

"Oh," said A-Yuan, nodding seriously.

"Nie-bobo's not here this time," said Wei Wuxian. "Just Nie-shushu, who wants to talk to me. Where's Baba gone?"

"He's escorting some of the Wen to their rooms," said Huaisang, and Wei Wuxian nodded, scanning the crowd.

"Right... Ah, perfect. Chengcheng!"

Jiang Cheng glanced up as Wei Wuxian skipped over, standing by his brother's back. "What do you want?" he asked suspiciously.

“There you go, A-Yuan, wait with Cheng-shushu,” said Wei Wuxian, and at once A-Yuan clambered onto Jiang Cheng’s back.

“What – wait – Wei Wuxian!” he snapped, holding up the hands of the two girls Zixuan had left with him. “I’m a little busy here!”

“Too busy for A-Yuan?” A-Yuan whimpered, making his biggest, saddest eyes, and at once Jiang Cheng’s face melted.

“I’m never too busy for A-Yuan,” he said, awkwardly craning his neck back as though trying to meet A-Yuan’s eyes. “But I have no hands, and I’m supposed to be making sure everyone’s settled. You’ll have to hold on like a monkey on your own.”

“I can do that!” said A-Yuan happily, and then he scrambled further up Jiang Cheng’s back, tugging on his uncle’s hair to sit himself on Jiang Cheng’s shoulders. “Then if you go fast, I can hold on like this!” he wrapped his little legs around Jiang Cheng’s neck, and hugged his arms around his uncle’s face, covering his eyes, and Wei Wuxian and Nie Huaisang burst out laughing.

“You look like you’ve got it handled, A-Cheng,” said Wei Wuxian, patting his brother’s hand before turning to Huaisang. “Shall we go to the library?”

“Let’s,” said Huaisang, nodding, and Jiang Cheng called after them through gritted teeth.

“Wei Wuxian, you are the worst Da-ge in the world!”

Wei Wuxian smiled, but memory turned it bittersweet. From that very first day, before she had even *met* him, Yu Ziyuan had been adamant he was not Jiang Cheng’s Da-ge. He’d hoped, when he was younger, that if he was a good enough shixiong, and good enough at cultivation, she might change her mind.

It didn’t matter now.

He pushed the thoughts to the back of his mind and made his way into the library, sitting down opposite Huaisang.

“So, Wei-xiong – how far have you got?” Nie Huaisang asked at once, his eyes searching Wei Wuxian’s with a steel that reminded him of a bird of prey. “Have you made any progress?”

“Not yet, Nie-xiong,” he replied apologetically, smiling wryly as Huaisang pouted. “I’ve read everything you’ve sent me, I promise! But I’m not sure about a solution yet. *Yet*. We’ll figure it out.”

Huaisang looked away, pursing his lips tightly as he gazed out over the lake. His grip was white-knuckled around his fan, and Wei Wuxian reached out, squeezing his friend’s shoulder.

“Hey,” he murmured, waiting until Huaisang looked at him before continuing, “I said I was going to figure it out. And we will. We have time, Nie-xiong. I *promise* you, we have time.”

“That’s easy for you to say,” Huaisang said tightly, looking away, and Wei Wuxian winced slightly. If it were Jiang Cheng who had a curse hanging over his head, he wouldn’t be any more patient – in fact, he would likely be a lot *less* patient. After all, it had taken him a matter of days after Jiang Cheng’s core had been crushed to cut his own core away to save him.

“Nie-xiong,” he murmured, “I promise, it’s my main priority right now. I’m trying. It will take time, I know it will, but in the other timeline it was five years before your brother was killed, and that was with Jin Guangyao making it worse.” He paused, and squeezed Huaisang’s shoulder again. “I can’t experiment as freely as I’d like to right now, but that just means I’ll have done more research by the time I get to start.”

Huaisang glanced at him, frowning slightly. “Why can’t you? Are you hurt?”

“No, no,” Wei Wuxian said quickly, hesitating for a moment. Then, he gave a sheepish smile. “I, uh... I just got my golden core back.”

Huaisang’s eyebrows rose, but he looked a lot less shocked than Wei Wuxian expected. “Oh! How?”

“Wait – you aren’t surprised I lost it in the first place?”

“Oh, I figured that out ages ago,” said Huaisang blithely, flicking out his fan, and Wei Wuxian drew back shaking his head.

“You *what*?”

Huaisang rolled his eyes, but his tone was glum as he spoke. “In Lanling, when we found out that Wen Qing had been taken, you said that Jin Guangyao had no golden core, and he thought Wen Qing could transfer someone else’s into him. Given that is *exactly* what you and Da-ge walked in on him trying to do, *clearly* she can. Which means that she’s done it before. You’re the only person I know who disappeared for a while and then suddenly stopped using traditional cultivation despite being amazing at it. With no actual explanation whatsoever. And then afterwards you sacrificed everything you had for Wen Qing and her people. Which means, presumably, she gave your core to someone else. Jiang Cheng is my guess. He said Wen Qing and Wen Ning helped him after Lotus Pier fell.”

Wei Wuxian sighed heavily. “They did. He didn’t know, though, about the transfer. He didn’t know until A-Zhui and the others came back. They made me tell him. I told him a story about Baoshan Sanren and a mountain, it’s... not important, now.”

Nie Huaisang raised an eyebrow. “You gave him your golden core and you didn’t tell him?”

Wei Wuxian moaned. “Nie-xiong! I’ve already been told off by Jiang Cheng, Shijie, and Lan Zhan. I don’t need the lecture again.”

Nie Huaisang looked down, closing his fan. He sighed, and his eyes looked sadder than Wei Wuxian had ever seen them. “I’m not going to lecture you. If it were me, I’d do the same thing. Da-ge... Wei-xiong, if... If he... I don’t have anyone else...” Huaisang’s voice broke, and Wei Wuxian’s resolve broke with it.

“Hey,” he said quietly, shifting over to sit beside Huaisang rather than opposite him and wrapping his arm tightly around his friend. At once, Huaisang pressed his face against Wei Wuxian’s shoulder, shuddering, and Wei Wuxian hugged him tight. “We’ll fix it, Nie-xiong. If future-me and future-you thought we could do it then of course we can. And you’re not on your own. I know I’m not quite Chifeng-zun quality, but I’m here.”

“It’s been a horrible month, Wei-xiong!” Huaisang’s voice was a half-wail, but also put on enough that Wei Wuxian smiled wryly.

“It hasn’t been the easiest, no.”

Sniffing, Huaisang sat up. “You haven’t even figured out where to start yet?”

“Not yet,” Wei Wuxian said softly. He’d be more annoyed about the repeated questioning if Huaisang didn’t sound so glum and hopeless. “As soon as I do, I’ll let you know, and we can work on it together.”

Huaisang sighed, looking very much like a kicked kitten. “I just feel so useless.”

“Nie-xiong, you and the Peacock just freed more than a dozen women from brothels they never should have been sold to, and you took even more children than that from the streets.” A grin tugged at Wei Wuxian’s cheek. “And apparently bought each and every one of them the most expensive outfits you could find. Don’t think I didn’t notice!”

Huaisang rolled his eyes, but he also began to wave his fan very quickly, the way he always did when he was getting distressed about something. “Not the *most* expensive, Wei-xiong, but you should have *seen* them – they were all dressed in such filthy, awful rags, it was awful! You can’t imagine it, you-” He broke off as Wei Wuxian raised his eyebrows, his cheeks turning redder than any Wen robes Wei Wuxian had ever seen. “Uh – I – I mean, I – uh...”

Wei Wuxian snorted. “It’s fine, Nie-xiong. But yes, I can imagine what they *were* wearing.”

“Well, I couldn’t let them *stay* in rags!” said Huaisang. “So of course they needed new clothes! And what was I supposed to do – buy new rags? No, no, that’d never do. So if what you mean to say is that now they all look presentable, yes, you’re right.”

“You could present them as gentry at a wedding! You do realise that you probably spent more on a single outfit than their families ever earned in a year?”

Nie Huaisang stared at him over his fan. “Wei-xiong, if you didn’t want them to come back well dressed, you shouldn’t have sent Jin-xiong and I to pick them up.”

Wei Wuxian laughed. “True, true...” Movement at the window caught his eye, and he glanced up in time to see Zizhen, Jingyi and Jinling walk past, the latter two bickering as Zizhen rolled his eyes. As Wei Wuxian watched, Jingyi took a swipe at Jinling with his crutch, one Jinling easily dodged.

Jingyi was the only one still using crutches – Xue Yang had all but crushed the bones in his ankle, and it would likely be another few weeks before it healed enough to go without them. It was an uncomfortable reminder of everything the four boys had been through, and Wei Wuxian breathed in sharply, turning back to Huaisang.

“Nie-xiong – you know more about the investigation at Jinlintai than we do, don’t you?” When Huaisang nodded, Wei Wuxian steeled himself. “Nie-xiong – I need you to tell me everything you know about Ouyang-zongzhu.”

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“Zizhen, can I borrow you for a minute?”

Zizhen glanced up, the hair on the back of his neck standing up. Jiang Cheng’s face was neutral enough, but there was something in his voice that set Zizhen’s nerves on edge. Nevertheless, he nodded, following the man out of the courtyard. Jiang Cheng didn’t say anything, and there was a tension in his shoulders that Zizhen didn’t like at all.

Once, Zizhen’s nervousness would be driven by the fear that he was in trouble, but now it was different. Jiang Cheng was worried about something – that on its own was enough to worry Zizhen.

“Jiang-xiong,” he said hesitantly. “Is everything okay?”

Jiang Cheng sighed, pausing, but only a moment later he began walking again. “It could be better,” he said gruffly. “Come on.”

Swallowing, Zizhen followed. They reached Jiang Cheng’s office, and at once Zizhen noticed that the shutters were drawn, and the door was pulled to. Standing just inside were Wei Wuxian and Nie Huaisang, and with a sinking feeling, Zizhen guessed that he knew what this was about.

In the days after the rescue, Jiang Cheng and Wei Wuxian had taken him aside and told him that Nie Huaisang had a few concerns about his father in relation to the camps, given that he had provided men to guard them. They’d asked if Zizhen didn’t mind waiting just a little longer to talk to him, waiting until they knew to what extent his father was involved.

“It’s your choice,” Wei Wuxian had said seriously. “If you want him here now, we’ll send for him.”

Zizhen didn’t mind waiting. He didn’t enjoy it, and every time he thought of his father his stomach churned, but he thought he would rather know than not. A small, childish part of him argued that surely his father hadn’t known how bad things were, surely he’d believed his cultivators when they told him they’d never abused prisoners in their care. He’d always thought of his father as a good man, if a stubborn and dismissive one.

But a growing part of him wasn’t sure.

Now, as he saw Wei Wuxian look at him and wince for a split second before he smiled, Zizhen had a feeling he knew which part of himself was right. His mouth felt very dry.



“I’ll let you talk,” said Nie Huaisang quietly, nodding at Jiang Cheng and Zizhen, but a thought struck Zizhen and he breathed in sharply.

“Wait! I – I just wanted to say thank you, Nie-gongzi.”

Nie Huaisang blinked, looking baffled. “For what?”

Zizhen shuffled uncomfortably, feeling his cheeks burn a little. “For... for sending me back. Here. I know it was you in the future, that you don’t remember and we’re not holding people accountable for things their future selves did, but – but I can’t thank that version of you. And he – you had no reason to do it. Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng and Zewu Jun, they – they were all sending back people they cared about but you – you didn’t even know me. And you still... you still sacrificed yourself to send me back, and – and I wish I could thank the version of you that did, I... I’m sorry, this... this is weird, but-”

“Don’t be sorry,” said Nie Huaisang quietly. “You’re right that I’m not... that me. I don’t deserve your thanks. But for what it’s worth, you’re welcome.” He paused, and then gave a small nod. “But if you think that version of me was remarkable for that, I hope you know that you are too.” Zizhen’s eyes widened, and Nie Huaisang smiled sadly. “More so, in fact. That version of me had tried to get revenge for Da-ge and ended up killing the only friends I had left, apparently. The least I could do in that situation is *try* to help. But you had no reason to believe Wei-xiong at all, in the future. Sizhui was raised by Lan-xiong, and he and Jingyi were obviously already a package deal, and it’s clear Jinling was involved because of Jiang-xiong, but you... You were brought up by a man who hates Wei-xiong, who’s been spouting rumours about him since the Sunshot Campaign, and you’re still here. You still listened. That’s no small thing.”

Zizhen’s mouth was hanging open. He realised it after an embarrassingly long moment and snapped it shut, looking wildly at Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng, and shaking his head. “I just – I – it just... made more sense.”

“He’s right, though,” Jiang Cheng said quietly. “By rights, there’s no way you should’ve had to be here. But I’m glad you are.”

“We all are,” said Wei Wuxian, smiling sadly. He reached forward, slinging an arm around Zizhen’s shoulder and pulling him close. “That’s why we all love you so much.”

Zizhen felt his cheeks burn bright red, but he couldn’t help but smile, even as he stared down at his toes.

“Well, I hardly know you yet,” said Nie Huaisang matter-of-factly, flicking open his fan. “But I’d like to. If future me sent you back it’s only right we should be friends. So enough of the Nie-gongzi – Nie-xiong works fine.”

Still a little too tongue-tied to reply properly, Zizhen nodded, and Huaisang smiled, and then sighed.

“I’ll let you all speak,” he said. “See you at dinner.”

With that, he was gone, and Jiang Cheng shut the door behind him, placing a silencing talisman on it with a heavy sigh.

Zizhen swallowed, twice. “This... this is about my A-Die, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” said Wei Wuxian quietly. “We should sit down.”

Zizhen let Wei Wuxian lead him to the table and sat down carefully, trying not to let his hands tremble. The brothers sat on either side of him, exchanging a glance that Zizhen couldn’t quite read. After a moment, Jiang Cheng glanced away, and Wei Wuxian sighed.

“Zizhen... how much do you know about your father’s involvement at Qiongqi Pass?”

Zizhen grimaced. “Not much,” he admitted. “I know that some of our clan were on guard duty there, and that two of them were killed. But it wasn’t exactly something we ever talked about...”

“Of course not,” said Wei Wuxian. “Why would it be?” He sighed, glancing down for a moment, before meeting Zizhen’s eyes again. “At Qiongqi Pass that day, the guards that Wen Ning killed... they were among the worst of them, the ones that treated the prisoners most cruelly. They were the ones that killed him.” Nausea curled in his stomach, and Zizhen winced. Wei Wuxian sighed heavily, and then continued. “We... already knew this. But the investigation... it’s uncovered the fact that Jin Guangshan sold many of the Wen off as labourers to several smaller clans – ones with more resent for the Wen in the first place, more respect for Lanling Jin... Including your father. Apparently, Ouyang-zongzhu was one of the ones who came to the camp himself to choose the men he wanted. He bought twenty, and...” Wei Wuxian broke off, pain in his eyes as he looked at Zizhen. “Zizhen, all of those men are now dead. Apparently, when they’d finished the work he wanted them for he had them executed for ‘crimes they committed during the war.’ But he knew... he knew none of them were cultivators. Or soldiers. The clans that bought labour were all assured Lanling Jin had killed all of the soldiers.”

Zizhen’s breath hitched in his throat, and nausea swelled in his stomach. That meant – that meant that the people his father had *bought* were innocent, as innocent as A-Yuan and Sizhui and their family – that meant that his father *knew* they had never hurt anyone. He’d heard his father speak of the Wen before, always in bitter tones, always insistent that none should have been allowed to survive, but he hadn’t – he hadn’t thought –

He hadn’t realised –

“Hey, Zizhen, breathe,” said Jiang Cheng suddenly, taking his wrist and squeezing it.

“Are – are you sure?” he choked, looking from Jiang Cheng to Wei Wuxian almost desperately. “Are – he couldn’t – he didn’t think they were soldiers, or – or –”

“As sure as we can be without having been there ourselves,” said Wei Wuxian quietly. “There are written records, documents. The testimony gathered so far seems consistent.”

“From what Ouyang-zongzhu said straight after Wei Wuxian went to Qiongqi Pass, he thought every last member of Qishan Wen deserved death,” said Jiang Cheng, his voice even quieter. “Some people say that the evil ran in their blood, that it would poison the world again if any Wen were allowed to survive. From what I saw, Ouyang-zongzhu was one of them. It wouldn’t surprise me if he doesn’t think he’s done anything wrong.”

Zizhen could feel his lower lip trembling, could feel tears rising up to form a lump in his throat. Memories spun around him, his father teaching him how to wield a sword, hugging him tightly after his first night-hunt, praising him for the comments he earned from his tutors. Scolding him for reading too many novels, for holding his head in the clouds.

After a long moment, Wei Wuxian put a hesitant hand on his shoulder. “Zizhen?”

“I... I didn’t think... When, when he said that Qishan Wen deserved to be killed to the last man I – I didn’t think he – that he meant... That he would... He – he – how could he do that? H-how could he see that place and – and know that the people there hadn’t hurt anybody and – and –”

“I don’t know,” Wei Wuxian murmured, pulling Zizhen into a hug. Immediately, Zizhen clung back, unable to keep from shuddering, trying *desperately* to keep from sobbing. “I’m sorry, Zizhen. I wish we didn’t have to tell you. But... but we do. For one thing, you deserve to know, but for another...” Wei Wuxian sighed, and his hand came to rest on Zizhen’s head. Tears burnt in Zizhen’s eyes, and he held his breath. “We will never tell you that you can’t see your father. That you can’t tell him the truth, about everything. But we have to ask you if you think it’s a good idea. And we ask that if you do decide to tell him, you do it here, so we can make sure that he can’t threaten you or any of the others.”

The idea of his father threatening him seemed ridiculous for a second – the second it took for Zizhen to realise that he was currently wrapped in the arms of the Yiling Patriarch, currently condemning his own father in the presence of the one person in the world his father seemed to hate the most.

What if he did?

What if Zizhen told his father, and his father told the whole world?

“Whatever you decide,” Jiang Cheng said, “we’re with you. Whatever happens, we’ll look after you. You’re family. That’s how it works.”

Zizhen took a deep breath and pulled back slightly, glancing between the two men again.

“What... what do you think I should do?”

They exchanged a glance.

“We can’t answer that for you,” said Jiang Cheng slowly. “We know that you’ve wanted to speak with him. If it will help you, then you should do it. But... there are risks, if we don’t do it carefully.”

Zizhen tried to swallow, but the lump in his throat wasn't going anywhere. Tears burnt in his eyes as he whispered, "He's not a bad father. He – he doesn't listen, much, but, but otherwise he – he was a good father. I – I thought he was a good man too..."

"I'm sorry, Zizhen," Wei Wuxian said again. "You don't have to decide now, okay? Have a think about it. Talk to Sizhui and Jingyi and Jinling if you want, but don't feel like you have to. This is about you, Zizhen. What you need. What you want. Just think about it."

"A-Jie always has good advice, too," said Jiang Cheng. "She's good at helping you figure out what it is you want."

"I think..." Zizhen whispered, "I think I want to know. To know what he knew, to understand... I want to understand... I want to hear it from him. I want – I want to see him. And my mother." The words came more easily than he'd expected.

"Okay," said Wei Wuxian, nodding sombrely. He didn't look disappointed, which was a relief. "Okay. Then we'll invite them to Lotus Pier."

A sudden thrill of fear shot through Zizhen, and he winced. "What about the Wen? If, if he–"

"There will be nothing he can do to them. They're under my protection – politically his hands are tied. And if he tries something anyway, he won't get close," said Jiang Cheng firmly.

"Sleep on it tonight – if you're sure that's what you want come find me first thing tomorrow, and I'll write the message then."

"Okay," Zizhen whispered.

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Three days later, Zizhen stood sandwiched between Wei Wuxian and Sizhui in the courtyard of Lotus Pier, watching as his father and mother walked into Lotus Pier. To Zizhen's dismay, Yao-zongzhu strutted in beside him, and they were flanked by a dozen disciples – far more than they needed to bring for a simple visit.

A lump rose in his throat, and he felt Sizhui lean into him from the side.

A few paces ahead of them, Jiang Cheng inclined his head. "Ouyang-zongzhu, Ouyang-furen, welcome to Lotus Pier. Yao-zongzhu – your presence is unexpected. Welcome to Lotus Pier."

"Jiang-zongzhu," said Yao-zongzhu imperiously. "It is good to be back at Lotus Pier, but I cannot say the circumstances are ideal."

"I was concerned, Jiang-zongzhu, that your invitation appeared somewhat like a summons," said Zizhen's father. "Given your surprising desire to provide shelter to the scum that burnt Lotus Pier to the ground, and the absurdity of this investigation you seemed all too eager to back in Lanling, it seemed prudent to bring a witness."

Zizhen could feel Wei Wuxian stiffen beside him, an angry tremor running down his arms where they were pressed up against Zizhen's, but on his other side Sizhui leant closer, pressing against him again.

“I will only tell you this once, so I suggest you listen.” Jiang Cheng’s voice was almost a growl. “Not one of the Wen in Lotus Pier bear any guilt for what happened that day. They were civilians – most of them are the elderly, women, or children. Few are cultivators. None fought in the war. The scum that burnt Lotus Pier are dead. Our people have been avenged. I will not have you dishonour their memory by passing guilt onto those who hold none! Is that understood?”

“Jiang-zongzhu, surely you understand we mean no disrespect,” said Zizhen’s mother, and his heart hurt. He wanted to run to her, to bury his face in her shoulder and hug her so tightly she laughed a protest, but he couldn’t. He knew he couldn’t. “It is simply hard for us to understand – the war is still so fresh a grief for us.”

“It is a fresh grief for us all,” said Jiang Cheng tightly. “But that should not excuse the killing of innocent people. Regardless, that is not what we invited you here to discuss. I have some questions regarding our trade agreements, Ouyang-zongzhu. I hoped to speak with you and your wife in private.”

“Yao-zongzhu,” said Jiang Yanli, before anyone could speak, “It is good fortune indeed that you are here too. I have been eager to speak to you about a matter, that, ah, quite frankly is a little embarrassing, with all the more important matters, but... Well...” She broke off for a moment, blushing. “Well, if you will all make me ask here, it is about your tailor, Yao-zongzhu. Your robes are always simply sublime, and I would love to find some for A-Xuan...”

Somewhere behind him, Zizhen heard Jingyi snort, though he didn’t think Yao-zongzhu did from the way he puffed up his chest, stroking his chin thoughtfully.

“Our conversation will not take too long,” said Jiang Cheng, clearly making an effort to keep his voice even. “While they wait, Jiang Jianyu will take your disciples to the dining hall for some refreshment. Ouyang-zongzhu, Ouyang-furen, this way, please.”

Zizhen’s father and Yao-zongzhu exchanged a glance, and then nodded, and Zizhen’s parents walked towards Jiang Cheng. Towards Zizhen. He held his breath as they passed him, his father glaring at Wei Wuxian as he did, his mother not even glancing in their direction.

“C’mon,” Wei Wuxian murmured, gently nudging Zizhen after them, and Sizhui squeezed his hand for a quick second.

“You know where we’ll be,” he whispered, and Zizhen nodded, following Jiang Cheng and his parents to Jiang Cheng’s office, with Wei Wuxian still at his side.

It did not take Ouyang-zongzhu long to notice that.

“Jiang-zongzhu – what is he doing here?”

“My brother is here to aid in the discussion,” said Jiang Cheng evenly, closing the office door behind them, and activating another silencing charm.

“I refuse to discuss any terms of trade with the Yiling Patriarch,” spat Zizhen’s father, and Zizhen flinched.

“Good thing it’s not really a trade discussion then, isn’t it?” said Wei Wuxian, twirling the end of his hair ribbon around his fingers.

“We’ve called you here for a matter that is extremely private,” said Jiang Cheng, before Ouyang-zongzhu could speak again. “And extremely delicate. We ask that you would listen. Zizhen?”

At once, Zizhen’s mother looked at him, and then she gave a small, sharp gasp, her eyes widening a fraction. “Forgive me, Jiang-zongzhu, what did you just say?”

“I’ve told you of this boy, A-Fan,” said Zizhen’s father, staring at him. “The cousin of Wei Wuxian who shares a name with our son. The one who testified about Jin Zixun-gongzi’s ambush at Qiongqi Pass.”

“Ah, yes,” said his mother, nodding, and Zizhen swallowed. His mouth felt very, very dry.

“Apparently, a cousin important enough to be part of so private a discussion.”

“A-Die,” Zizhen complained, the word falling from his lips automatically.

Well. That would do it.

As his father’s mouth dropped open, and Zizhen bowed.

“Truthfully, my name is not Wei Zizhen,” he said quickly. “My name is Ouyang Zizhen, and I’m your son. I know that seems impossible and ridiculous, but it’s true – I was sent back in time with some of my friends, and –”

“Preposterous!” his father spat, and Zizhen flinched back. Ouyang-zongzhu strode towards the door, but Wei Wuxian blocked his way.

“We asked you to listen, Ouyang-zongzhu,” he said softly. “Zizhen may not be my cousin, but I will protect him as if he’s my brother. So, listen.”

Heart hammering in his throat, Zizhen looked to his mother. She was studying him carefully, a suspicious frown on her face, her hand on his father’s arm. But though she was frowning, she wasn’t glaring, and she didn’t look furious.

“I – I am your son,” he said, his voice trembling. Despite himself, Zizhen felt a tear slide down his cheek, and he took a deep breath. “I know you. I know, A-Niang, that you love singing terrible, sappy love songs that drive A-Die mad, that, that you love plants but manage to kill every single one you ever put in a pot. I know, A-Die, that you’ve bought the same scented oil from the same tiny stall in Tanzhou ever since you were my age, because you say no one makes it quite like Li-xiansheng does. I know that you’re – that you’re good parents, and that A-Kan is the perfect child. That he’s patient and clever and well-behaved, and that – that he carries me and A-Shan around if we get tired without being asked. He’d carry A-Qin too, but she’s too independent.” Suddenly, a realisation he’d somehow missed struck Zizhen

square in the face, and he stared at the slight bump of his mother's stomach. "I know that you're pregnant," he whispered, "her name is Meixiang. She... she was, she'll be – quiet, and sweet, but clever. I think – I think she's the cleverest of all of us..."

"You claim to be our Zizhen?" his mother asked, her voice shaking slightly.

"I am your Zizhen," he said, his voice breaking. "There was... an incident, in a temple – a powerful cultivator had stabbed Hanguang Jun, and imprisoned me and my friends, along with Jiang-zongzhu, Nie-zongzhu and Zewu Jun and – and they wanted Wei Wuxian to make an array to kill all the other clan leaders, including... including you, A-Die. And he didn't, he – he made an array to send us back in time, instead. He was able to use the Stygian Tiger Amulet, and we don't, don't think the array could ever be used again for a number of reasons but that's – that's why I'm here. And that's why I was at Qiongqi Pass – in the life I led, Jin Zixuan was killed there by Su She, who was controlling Wen Ning. It's how we knew to interrupt in time, how we were able to keep everyone safe."

For a long moment, his parents said nothing. They simply stared at him, their faces blank, and Zizhen tried not to hold his breath.

Then, after an endless, aching moment, his father murmured, "Zizhen?"

Even as tears welled in his eyes, Zizhen smiled and nodded. "It's me, A-Die."

His father stepped forward, and then he gave the smallest smile Zizhen had ever seen, and hugged him. It was a much quicker and stiffer hug than Zizhen was used to from his father, but it was a hug all the same, and then his mother was hugging him, and relief swelled within him so strong he wanted to cry.

But then his mother pulled back, her hand tight around his wrist, and she looked at Jiang Cheng.

"Jiang-zongzhu – how dare you keep this from us? If he arrived the day of Jin Rulan's one month celebration then he has been here over a *month*!"

"A-Niang," Zizhen began, but his father took over her momentum.

"He did not say anything at Jinlintai – clearly you've been keeping him away intentionally, maybe even by force –"

"How da-" Jiang Cheng began, but Wei Wuxian grabbed his brother's wrist, and Jiang Cheng breathed out slowly.

"No one's forced me to do anything!" Zizhen said quickly. "A-Die, A-Niang, I wanted to help. But I didn't want to bring any trouble to the clan, or to you, and so I didn't want to say anything until everything was solved! It was my choice – they always gave me a choice. Wei Wuxian even let me use Suibian – I could've left anytime, if I wanted to."

"What did you give him?" hissed Ouyang-zongzhu, gripping Zizhen's wrist painfully tight. "I will not have my son exposed to your wicked tricks!"

“Relax,” said Wei Wuxian dryly. “Suibian is my sword. Zizhen wielded it well.”

Zizhen had wielded it like a *club*, but it was good to know people still thought well of it.

“A-Die,” said Zizhen. “Wei Wuxian has saved my life more times than I can count. He’s a good man, but he’s misunderstood, and –”

“A good man? Do you know nothing of the evil cultivation he practises? The wicked tricks that corrupt everything and everyone around him? The people he has *killed*?” his father protested, letting go of Zizhen’s wrist, and Zizhen felt tears burn at his eyes.

“How many people have *you* killed, A-Die? They say that you *knew* there were no soldiers at those camps, but that you sent guards there and bought innocent people as *slaves* from there, and they say that you killed them? Is it true?”

His father gave a bitter laugh. “That is entirely different. The Wen clan destroyed far more lives than we ever touched. When their work was complete, they were given a merciful end. They may not have held swords, but they contributed to the war effort. They helped their clan trample ours to the ground. They were all complicit.”

“There were *children* there, A-Die,” choked Zizhen.

“I had nothing to do with the children,” said his father, but he didn’t look as perturbed as Zizhen had prayed he would be.

“My cousin was killed at Qiongqi Pass,” said his mother, staring at him. “I loved him dearly. There is no way you could not have known this. Are you telling me you believe that *he* was cruel in his treatment of the prisoners? That you would believe the word of the *Wen* over that of your own kin?”

The words struck like a blow. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Jiang Cheng and Wei Wuxian bristling, but they weren’t getting involved. They’d told him they wouldn’t unless he asked them to. His lip trembled.

“Yes,” he whispered. “Yes, I do.”

His mother recoiled, and took several steps back. She pressed her hand against her heart and slowly shook her head, and his father scoffed. Something about the sound seemed broken.

“Zizhen,” he said, and it was just the way he always said it when he was serious, and it was so familiar that it ached, “We swore, after Qiongqi Pass, that Wei Wuxian would forever be an enemy of Baling Ouyang. That if the great clans could forgive his misdeeds that was one thing – but that we could not. You know that. There is no way you could not know that.”

“But if he didn’t *do* the misdeeds we’re talking about-”

“Zizhen!” his father said sharply, and he fell silent. “Tell me – if we leave now, will you swear to cut all association with Wei Wuxian? Will you swear to never spend time in his company again, to stay away from the wicked path he has carved for himself?”



Zizhen's breath caught painfully in his throat. "What? No, I can't! A-Die, he's my friend, he's a good man, I *trust* him--"

But his father was shaking his head. "How could we have raised you to be so ungrateful? So unfilial?"

Pain spasmed across his chest, and Zizhen's eyes widened. "What? I'm not! Die, I'm not ungrateful or unfilial, I --"

"You have chosen Wei Wuxian over your own family, your own clan! Over your own father! What is that, if not unfilial?" his father demanded, and his mother was nodding, *nodding*, her face sad, but also terrifyingly resolved.

"I haven't chosen anything!" Zizhen protested, panic rising within him. "You -- you taught me to always try to do what was right and that's all I've done! I wanted to make sure that my friends were safe before I found you, I didn't -- I didn't *choose* --"

"Yes, you did," said his mother softly. "You make your alignment clear here. If you will not renounce Wei Wuxian, and cut your ties with him, you will leave us with no choice."

Zizhen felt like he'd fallen straight into the coldest part of the lake, like something was wrapping around his neck and dragging him down. "No -- no choice? A-Niang, what are you talking about? A-Niang?"

"Ouyang-furen," said Jiang Cheng, stepping forward, but she shook her head again.

"How could we allow you to continue to call yourself our son, if you claim kinship with a murderer our clan has sworn enmity with? You took his *name*, Zizhen."

"A-Niang," Zizhen whispered, but he could barely breathe. He didn't understand -- but he *did* understand -- and everything was falling out of control so fast. "A-Niang, I --"

"She is right," said his father, his voice hollow and hurt. "To stand with him... You have betrayed us, Zizhen, and we cannot--"

"I haven't!" Zizhen cried. "If he didn't do the things that people said he did then the feud is baseless, isn't it? A-Die, A-Niang, I've never betrayed you, I'd never, I'd *never*! I love you! I love you, A-Die, A-Niang, *please*!"

His father closed his eyes and looked away, and his mother shook her head.

"I am sorry," she said. "Clearly, we must have greatly failed you. But we will not fail our other children, and we will not fail *our* Zizhen."

"What are you saying?" Zizhen choked. "A-Niang, what are you saying?"

"I am saying that for as long as you stand with Wei Wuxian, you should never call me A-Niang again," she said, and Zizhen choked out a cry. "You may have been born of us, but in your choices you have severed that tie. Perhaps if we had raised you better, such a thing

would not have happened. As it is, you are no longer a part of the Ouyang family, nor welcome in Baling. You will not come near my family, especially my children.”

A strangled keen left Zizhen’s throat, and Wei Wuxian stepped forward.

“Ouyang-furen,” he said, “I understand your feud with me. But Zizhen has not done *anything* that would betray your family, and when he got here he didn’t have any choice but to align with me. Don’t do this. Please.”

“We have a son named Ouyang Zizhen,” said his father, opening his eyes and looking back at Zizhen. There was a heartache in his eyes, but it was overshadowed by anger and disgust, and Zizhen shook his head. “It is not you. Perhaps one day you will come to your senses – if you do, if you become willing to renounce Wei Wuxian and all associated with him, then perhaps you may re-join our clan. Until then, do not return to Baling.”

“A-Die,” he sobbed, his hand reaching out, but his father stepped back, stepped away, and Zizhen felt his heart crumble within him. “A-Die, A-Niang, please –”

“Stay away from us, Wei-gongzi,” said his mother, staring right at him as she wiped the tears from her face. “Please.”

“I think it best if we leave,” said his father, looking pointedly away from Zizhen, who choked.

“Wait!” snapped Jiang Cheng, as his parents moved towards the door.

“Are you going to order me to rescind my words?” said Ouyang-zongzhu, glaring at Jiang Cheng. “Do you think because your clan is bigger than mine you can tell me who I can and cannot exile from my sect?”

Exile. Exile. *Exile.*

The word hit like an arrow, aching through his chest, and Zizhen felt like he was falling.

“No,” snarled Jiang Cheng, Zidian sparking on his wrist. He took a deep breath, and the energy calmed. A little. “You’re a fucking idiot for doing what you just did, but it’s not my place to stop it. It is, however, my place to inform you that if you speak a single word of this to *anyone* outside this room, you will regret it dearly. If you ever do *anything* that could hurt or even threaten Zizhen – including revealing his identity or the fact the time-travel ever happened to *anyone* outside this room – you will face the full wrath of Yunmeng Jiang, and I can assure you that Hanguang Jun, Zewu Jun, Jin Zixuan and Nie Mingjue would be alongside us, with or without the backing of their clans. If you ever do anything that *does* hurt Zizhen, I will kill you.”

“Are you threatening me, Jiang-zongzhu?” demanded his father, drawing his sword partway out of its sheath. Immediately, Wei Wuxian was in front of Zizhen, and his father cringed slightly.

“Yes, I am,” said Jiang Cheng. “Well done for keeping up.”

“In case you wonder why he didn’t namedrop the Yiling Patriarch too, that’s because I’m fully back to Yunmeng Jiang now,” said Wei Wuxian, a deadly smile on his face. “But rest assured, there is *nothing* I wouldn’t do to keep Zizhen safe. So, if you want to walk away from him, we’ll let you. If you want to pretend he doesn’t exist, that’s fine. But if you threaten him, you will wish that you’d never been born.”

Zizhen’s mother was ashen white, and his father was trembling, but neither – neither of them looked regretful or doubtful and they were disowning him, and -

“You can tell Yao-zongzhu that the new deal we proposed was so offensive you’re leaving immediately, if you want,” said Jiang Cheng. “But tell him a word of what was really said, and you’ll regret it.”

His father stared for a long moment, and then gave a ‘hmp,’ barging past Jiang Cheng and out the door, his mother beside him.

They didn’t look back.

“Zizhen,” Wei Wuxian murmured, his voice breaking. His hand hovered over Zizhen’s shoulder, as though he wasn’t sure whether his presence would be welcome. “Zizhen, I’m so, so sorry.”

Zizhen buried his face in Wei Wuxian’s chest and sobbed.

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! I hope you enjoyed that chapter! Please do let me know what you think if you have the time and the fancy to, I love hearing from you. We will get more of the REST of the juniors too next chapter, I promise!

# Chapter 50

## Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for the amazing response to the last chapter! I can hardly believe this story's hit fifty chapters, but there are still a few beats left to tell just yet, and I hope you enjoy them!

Additionally - one of my amazing commenters has translated this fic into Spanish and it's available to read on Wattpad! The link is in the notes at the bottom of the chapter :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Wei Wuxian felt like his heart was being ripped apart in his chest as Zizhen's tears soaked into his shirt. The boy was clinging to him as though he was drowning, his entire body trembling and shuddering, but his sobs were heartbreakingly quiet, even muffled against Wei Wuxian's shoulder.

"Zizhen," he murmured. "Zizhen, if you want to go after them and tell them you renounced me you can. I understand, I'll know you don't mean it."

Zizhen shook his head, his fists twisting tighter into the back of Wei Wuxian's robes. "No, I can't, I can't!" But then he gave a weak, strangled cry and pulled back, looking between Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng with a stricken expression. "Un-unless you w-want me t-to – to-"

"No!" said Wei Wuxian, at the exact moment Jiang Cheng said,

"Don't be an idiot!"

"We don't want you to go anywhere," Wei Wuxian insisted, and Zizhen dropped his face back down with a soft keening. Immediately, Wei Wuxian put a hand on the back of his head, stroking his hair gently. "It's okay, Zizhen, it's okay. We don't want you to go anywhere. I'm sorry, Zizhen. I'm so, so sorry..." He trailed off helplessly, glancing at Jiang Cheng.

He could see Jiang Cheng's jaw clenching, could see him trembling as he fought to keep his anger to himself, but the strongest emotion in Jiang Cheng's eyes was heartache, and he looked lost. He shook his head slightly as Wei Wuxian looked at him. He didn't know what to say either.

"I'm so sorry," Wei Wuxian murmured again, cuddling Zizhen closer. "I'm so, so sorry."

"N-not – your – fault," Zizhen sobbed, and Wei Wuxian winced, because it was, but hearing that probably wouldn't make Zizhen feel any better. "They – they – I didn't – I didn't... I – I love them!"

“I know,” Wei Wuxian whispered, feeling tears escape his own eyes. “I know, Zizhen, I know.”

“I – I – thought – I thought they –”

Wei Wuxian closed his eyes, pressing his lips to Zizhen’s hair. “I’m sorry, Zizhen. I’m so sorry. But we’re here... We’re here, Zizhen, and we love you. We love you so much, okay?”

“And there’s nothing you can do to stop that,” added Jiang Cheng firmly, putting a hand on Zizhen’s back. “Nothing. Whatever you do, however badly you screw things up, we will always, always help you find your way home. That’s how it works in this family, okay?”

Wei Wuxian winced as Zizhen flinched at the wording, and Jiang Cheng grimaced.

“We love you,” Wei Wuxian repeated. “We love you so much.” He wanted to say more, but he didn’t know what to say. There was nothing he could do, nothing he could do at all, except hold Zizhen close until exhaustion drained the crying away.

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“But what do we *do*?” Jingyi asked again, even though he knew it was useless. Sizhui and Jinling didn’t have any more of an idea than he did what to do. How could they? None of their parents had disowned them. None of their parents –

“Do... do we ask if he wants to talk about it?” asked Jinling, with a grimace that suggested he’d rather do anything else.

“I don’t know if that would help,” Sizhui murmured. “I... I wouldn’t know what to say... And we... we all got our parents back.”

“But it’s not fair!” Jingyi said, for the fifteenth time. “After everything he’s done-”

“We know!” interrupted Jinling, folding his arms across his chest. “We were there. We know as much as you do.”

Jingyi scowled, and prodded him with his crutch. “I know you know! But what I don’t know is what the hell we’re supposed to *do*!”

“Jingyi, Jinling, stop it,” Sizhui said wearily, and Jingyi sighed.

He could still see the anger on Ouyang-zongzhu’s face as he stormed out of Lotus Pier the day before, as though *he* was the one who had been hurt, as though *he* was the one that had been cast out of his family for no reason at all.

Jingyi clenched his teeth, grasping his crutches so tightly his fingers hurt. “I want to chase them down and beat them until they’re *begging* to apologise,” he snarled, before catching himself. He waited for Sizhui to chide him, but instead his friend just sighed.

“I don’t think that would help,” he said glumly.

“It definitely wouldn’t,” said Jinling, “or Jiujiu wouldn’t’ve let them leave the room in one piece.”

Thinking back on the look on Jiang Cheng’s face, Jingyi believed it. But thinking back on Jiang Cheng’s face was a mistake, because he’d seen it when he, Sizhui, and Jinling had hurried to the office after seeing the Ouyang clan storm out.

They’d arrived just in time to see Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng ushering Zizhen down the hall, and they’d called out to them –

And Zizhen had looked over his shoulder, and he looked –

He looked –

Devastated was the only word Jingyi could think of. He was pale, but his eyes were red and swollen, and there were still tears on his cheeks, and when he saw them he’d closed his eyes and turned his head away, and Wei Wuxian had taken most of his weight, and shoed the other three away.

“We’ll come find you later,” he said, and then he and Jiang Cheng and Zizhen had disappeared around the corner, eventually barricading themselves in Jiang Cheng’s rooms.

It was now the next morning, *mid-morning*, at that, and they hadn’t seen Zizhen since.

Jiang Cheng had reappeared once or twice, though never when Wei Wuxian was also there, and Jiang Yanli had been the only one they let into the room. She was the one that had told Jingyi and the others what had happened.

That Zizhen’s parents had disowned him.

That they had accepted that he was who he said he was, and they had still cast him aside.

Jingyi could still remember the pain and the fear he’d felt in the Burial Mounds, when his grandmother and Lan Qiren had accused him of impersonating a member of the Lan clan. Even then, he’d been sure that Nainai would never turn her back on him if she knew the truth. He had been right, but he couldn’t imagine how much it would hurt if he hadn’t been.

It was intolerable.

There was a small knock on the door.

“Come in,” Sizhui called quietly, and the door slid open.

“Zizhen!” Jingyi said, leaping to his feet, only to be immediately reminded why that was a bad idea by both splintering pain up his leg and by his crutches clattering to the floor in two different directions.

A weak little smile tugged at the corner of Zizhen’s mouth, but it didn’t do much to distract from the awful paleness of his face, or the dark, heavy bags beneath his eyes. “Hi...”

“How are you feeling?” Jinling asked urgently, but Zizhen winced, and Sizhui shook his head slightly.

“Jinling,” he murmured, and Jinling went bright red.

“It’s alright,” Zizhen said, but his voice was small, and fragile, and it hardly sounded like Zizhen at all. He didn’t answer Jinling’s question.

“What can we do?” Sizhui asked gently, and to Jingyi’s horror Zizhen’s face crumpled slightly, and his lip quivered a little.

“I don’t know,” he mumbled, and Jingyi had to fight the urge to run to Baling and beat Ouyang-zongzhu to death with his crutches. “I don’t want to talk about it, if that’s okay...”

“Of course it’s okay,” said Sizhui, in the soft, calm voice that had comforted Jingyi through all of his worst days. He reached out, taking Zizhen’s arm and leading him back to sit with them. “We don’t have to talk about anything if you don’t want to. Or we can talk about useless little things, if you’d prefer. Whatever you want.”

Zizhen gave a breathless, hollow laugh. “I don’t know what I want...”

“That’s okay,” murmured Sizhui. He glanced at Jingyi for just a split second, letting his concern and hopelessness into his eyes for that single, fleeting second before he blinked, hiding it away again with a mask of calm he had to have learnt from Zewu Jun. “We can start talking about nonsense, and then you can tell us to be quiet, if you’d prefer it.”

Jingyi very much hoped that Sizhui had an idea of what sort of nonsense he wanted to talk about, because Jingyi couldn’t think of a single thing that wasn’t related directly to family – either his or someone else’s – and by the look on Jinling’s face, he was thinking the same.

But Sizhui started to talk about the rabbits at Cloud Recesses, and the time that he and Jingyi had got lost on the way back from feeding them. Jingyi remembered it well. It had, of course, been all his fault. He’d noticed that the rabbits particularly enjoyed eating dandelion leaves, so he’d insisted on following a trail of them into the woods to collect more of them. As they went, Sizhui had picked the flowers, too, declaring happily that he would give them to his father when they got home.

Unfortunately, at seven years old neither of them had had the foresight to realise that by pulling up both the leaves and the flowers, they left absolutely no trail to follow back.

“...when we realised we were lost we didn’t know what to do, so Jingyi declared that if we cried loudly enough, someone would come to tell us off, if not find us.”

Jinling snorted, and Jingyi scowled at him. “It was a good plan. It worked.”

“Mn,” said Sizhui, smiling. “Zewu Jun found us. Dark had fallen, so we thought it must have been hours, but it wasn’t that long.”

“And we didn’t even get in trouble,” said Jingyi smugly, though as he did, he remembered how the story ended.

*“A-Yuan! A-Yuan!”*

*A chill ran down Jingyi’s spine, and he glanced at Sizhui in surprise. He’d never heard Hanguang Jun’s voice so loud before, and he’d never imagined that it could be so afraid. Shifting them in his arms, Zewu Jun hurried towards the sound of the voice.*

*“Wangji, they’re here,” he called calmly, and then with a gasp Hanguang Jun burst through the trees in front of them, his face stricken.*

*“A-Yuan,” he choked, immediately grabbing Sizhui from his brother’s arms and holding him close. Confused, Jingyi glanced between Zewu Jun – who looked concerned – and Sizhui, who looked just as confused as Jingyi did. Still, Sizhui patted his father’s hair, letting Hanguang Jun crush him against his chest.*

*“Wangji,” Zewu Jun murmured. “They are fine. They were picking dandelions for the rabbits, and they got lost. Children wander. It is fine.”*

*But Hanguang Jun turned away from Zewu Jun and from Jingyi without a word, carrying Sizhui away. Zewu Jun sighed, and looked down at Jingyi.*

*“Zewu Jun, is – is everything okay?” Jingyi asked uncertainly, and Zewu Jun smiled, so warmly it instantly melted Jingyi’s nerves.*

*“Everything is fine. It’s just that Wangji has not been out of seclusion for very long, so this is the first time he hasn’t been able to find Sizhui while he’s under his care. It’s quite frightening for parents when children disappear,” Zewu Jun chided gently, and Jingyi hung his head.*

*“Oh,” he said, looking down at the green leaves still clutched in his hand, the stray dandelion or two that had fallen from Sizhui’s grip as his father carried him away.*

*“It’s alright,” said Zewu Jun, jogging Jingyi on his hip. “Let’s get on back before we’re late for dinner, shall we?”*

It made sense now, in a way it never had before, why Hanguang Jun had been so afraid. Why he had panicked when Sizhui wasn’t where he should have been.

“When Fairy was a puppy, she loved chasing rabbits. Once, she chased them halfway down a rabbit hole and got stuck – by the time I caught up with her, only her tail and her hind legs were sticking out. It took me ages to pull her out again...” Jinling paused, glancing down at his hands.

The conversation kept petering out, an awkwardness hanging around them that Jingyi didn’t know how to shake. Zizhen was hardly meeting their eyes, and never really spoke, but he didn’t ask them to be quiet either. Jingyi didn’t know what to say. He didn’t know what to do.

Then, there was another knock on the door.

This time, Sizhui glanced at Zizhen, waiting for his nod before replying, “Come in?”



Jingyi didn't expect to be surprised by whoever was coming through the door – there were no shortage of people at Lotus Pier who would be eager to check in on Zizhen – but he was.

It was Nie Huaisang.

“Good morning,” he said, with a shy smile and a slightly awkward bow as Sizhui, Jinling, and Zizhen rose to their feet to bow. Jingyi followed a beat behind them, this time remembering to grab his crutches for balance. “Sorry to interrupt.”

“You’re not interrupting,” said Sizhui. “How can we help you?”

“I heard about, uh, what happened yesterday,” said Nie Huaisang, wincing as he glanced at Zizhen, before raising his chin slightly. “I was hoping that maybe I’d be able to help take your mind off things.”

Jingyi glanced at Zizhen. There was a faint curiosity on his face as he asked, “What did you have in mind?”

Something that looked very much like mischief sparkled in Nie Huaisang’s eyes as he smiled. “I have a plan for the perfect distraction from anything and everything – if you want to. It’ll be fun.”

“Okay,” Zizhen said hesitantly, glancing at the others, who all nodded.

If it could make Zizhen feel better, Jingyi would do anything.

Nie Huaisang grinned, waving his hands slightly in excitement. “Great! Follow me, now, and stay quiet! We don’t want to get caught.”

Instantly curiosity spiked within Jingyi, but he saw Sizhui frown slightly.

“Why?” Sizhui asked hesitantly.

“It’s a surprise,” said Nie Huaisang, though he did wave a small piece of paper at them, before placing it on the side. “That’s where we’re going, in case anyone worries, or something happens, and they need to find us. But we’re not going far. Come on!” He whirled around, towards the door, but then appeared to change his mind, spinning all the way around to point his fan at Jingyi. “How far are you able to walk?”

“Pretty far,” said Jingyi, shrugging even as he adjusted his crutches. The good thing about constantly being punished with handstands was that his arms didn’t get nearly as tired as they might have done otherwise. “I mean I don’t think it’d be a good idea to go on a Night Hunt, but it’ll be a while before my arms get tired.”

“We’re not going on a *Night Hunt*,” Nie Huaisang said, sounding faintly appalled as his nose wrinkled up. “Alright, keep quiet now, come on.”

Excitement sparked in Jingyi’s stomach as Nie Huaisang led them out of the room, and then out of Lotus Pier, dodging every Jiang disciple and Wen member that they saw. As they

headed into the woods, Jingyi kept an eye on Zizhen. He could see a little curiosity in his friend's dull eyes, but for the most part Zizhen looked like he was a thousand miles away.

They'd walked perhaps twenty minutes into the woods when Nie Huaisang led them into a little clearing. In its centre was a bundle of firewood, surrounded by a circle of cushions, one of which was set on a low tree stump. There were several large intricately woven baskets set to one side, and as Nie Huaisang held out a hand, the firewood caught light.

Jingyi's eyes widened as pink and purple flames sprang up from the bonfire, the colours shifting before his eyes through blues and greens, yellows and oranges, and then reds and pinks again.

"Wow! How'd you do that?" demanded Jinling, awe in his eyes, and Nie Huaisang grinned, puffing up his chest slightly and bringing out his fan.

Instead of answering, gave a light shrug, and nodded towards the cushion on the tree stump. "I thought it'd be easier for you to get up from there rather than siting lower down."

Jingyi was slightly surprised at the thought, and he smiled. "Thanks!"

Nie Huaisang nodded, and then moved over to the baskets, looking over them all ceremoniously. "Now, before we begin, there are only two rules here! First and foremost, no one apart from Zizhen is allowed to bring up what happened yesterday. If you want to talk about it, Zizhen, we can, but otherwise it's off limits! Secondly, if at any point you feel queasy, for goodness' sake say something before you throw up and make a mess. Got it? Wonderful!"

"Uh..." Sizhui hesitated, but Jingyi grinned as he nodded. He had an idea he knew what Nie Huaisang's plan was.

Sure enough, Huaisang reached into the nearest basket and pulled out five cups, and several jars.

"Is that alcohol?" asked Jinling, his eyes widening, and Huaisang grinned.

"Uh... Nie-gongzi, with all due respect I – I'm not sure that's such a good idea," said Sizhui uncertainly, but Nie Huaisang stood up straight, holding up a cup towards Zizhen.

"If you don't want to, we don't have to drink," he said. "But there's no better way to forget horrible things than drinking with friends."

Zizhen pursed his lips, but then he nodded, taking the cup and draining it in one go. Smiling sadly, Huaisang refilled the cup with a gentle warning.

"Go slower with that one," he said. "Sit down, make yourself comfortable."

Zizhen looked a little uncertain, so Jingyi decided to sit too, hobbling over to the tree-stump and sitting himself down. The cushion was surprisingly comfortable, and he set down his crutches, smiling as Zizhen made himself comfortable on the pillow beside him.

Then, Huaisang poured another cup, pausing before Jingling.

“Have you ever drunk before?” he asked, and Jinling puffed up like an angry bird.

“Of course I have!”

But Nie Huaisang raised his eyebrows, and Jingyi stared, and Jinling’s cheeks slowly went red.

“There’s no reason to be embarrassed, Jinling,” Zizhen said, smiling slightly. “You *are* younger than us.”

Jinling scowled, but then his lips twisted, and he sighed. “No, I haven’t.”

“Then you’ll start with one cup and we’ll go from there,” said Huaisang sagely, before looking sharply at Jingyi. “You only get one to start with too. You’re a Lan.”

“Hey!”

“You are a Lan,” repeated Nie Huaisang, passing Jingyi a cup as Jinling sat down Zizhen’s other side. “I’m not taking any chances. I don’t need you passing out and falling off the tree-stump.”

“Rude,” muttered Jingyi, but he took the offered cup. It wasn’t exactly unfounded – he’d only drunk alcohol once before, and he knew his tolerance wasn’t *particularly* high. But still.

“But you,” Huaisang continued, passing a cup to Sizhui and looking curiously at him. “You’re not a Lan by birth, so you probably won’t pass out after one cup.”

“Ahh...” Sizhui hesitated, and didn’t take the cup, instead chewing on his lip. Jingyi glanced at Sizhui carefully, lowering his cup.

“Sizhui,” he said, and his brother looked at him quickly. “If you don’t want to, you don’t have to. But if it’s just the rules you’re worried about, there’s no rules against drinking at Lotus Pier.”

Sizhui grimaced slightly. “I... it’s forbidden...”

Jingyi looked intently at Sizhui, waiting until he met his eye. “But do you *want* to?”

“I...”

“There’s no pressure,” said Nie Huaisang, taking a light blue jar from the box as well. “This one is just water, if you prefer. But if you want to try some, you’re not going to get in trouble.”

Sizhui glanced at Huaisang doubtfully. “Hanguang Jun...”

“Do you really think he’ll mind, given the circumstances? And given that Wei-xiong drinks all the time?” He paused for a moment, and then smiled. “Here, I’m so certain that no one

will be in trouble that I'll take full responsibility if someone does try to tell us off, okay? But still, no pressure. Only drink if you want to." Huaisang's smile became more nostalgic, and he leant across to nudge Sizhui with his elbow. "You know, I've seen Xichen-ge drunk before."

"I don't believe you," said Jingyi immediately, but glee was rising within him at the thought of it.

"It's the truth, whether you believe it or not," said Nie Huaisang, fanning himself slowly with a smug smile. "In Qinghe. Come – take a cup, water or wine or both, your choice, and I'll tell you the story."

Sizhui nodded, hesitating for a moment before taking a cup of wine and a cup of water, one in each hand. He sat down at Jingyi's other side, resting both cups carefully in front of him. Rather than sitting in a circle around the fire, they formed a little circle beside it to be able to hear each other better.

"So," said Nie Huaisang, sitting down on a cushion and wiggling until he was apparently comfortable, and then he leant back, sipping at his own wine. "It was several years ago now – I think I must've been about thirteen? Maybe a little younger. I can't remember. But anyway, Da-ge had started making me go to bed very early while Xichen-ge was visiting, which I thought was very unfair, so I decided to sneak out one night and see what it was they were doing. It took me a good while to find them, too, but eventually I thought to check the training grounds, because that was the last place Da-ge would think I would ever go. What I found..." He laughed slightly, shaking his head and then leaning back, smiling like a satisfied cat. "I found Da-ge trying to convince Xichen-ge to stop dancing with around the room. Xichen-ge was so excited about *everything* – he found a feather on the floor and gasped like he'd found a hunk of gold. Xichen-ge was well and truly drunk, and thought everything was wonderful."

Jingyi couldn't help but smile at the thought. It was easy to imagine, actually, easier than he might've expected. Zewu Jun was never slow to smile, but the thought of him being so enchanted by life was nice. It was humanising, and in much nicer a way than the last month or so had been.

Sizhui looked a little surprised, though, and he glanced down at the two cups, hesitating for a moment before picking up the one with the alcohol in and glancing up at Jingyi.

"Are you sure?" Jingyi checked, and Sizhui smiled nervously. "Together?"

Sizhui nodded. "Together."

Together, they drank.

"Is it supposed to taste so bad?" asked Jinling, screwing up his nose and staring inside his cup. "I don't think it's working."

"It takes more than two seconds," Nie Huaisang said, but even as he did, Jingyi felt a warmth flow through him from head to toe. It was nice, very nice, almost like being snuggled up in a

fluffy blanket, except he didn't feel sleepy at all. Happiness bubbled in him, and he wiggled on the stump to get more comfortable.

"Hey! You're red already!" cried Jinling gleefully, pointing at Jingyi, who frowned.

"I am not," he said, but Zizhen gave a little cough.

"You're a little pink, Jingyi."

"Pfft!" said Jingyi, shaking his head.

"Here, I bought some cards," said Nie Huaisang, reaching into his pocket. "I know some fantastic drinking games..."

And just like that, it felt like a party. The alcohol hit Jinling quickly, despite his earlier protests, turning his cheeks bright red (and clearly, obviously redder than Jingyi's) and giving him the hiccups, though he also became significantly chattier. It was actually a little endearing – he chattered away openly about whatever was on his mind, with none of his usual awkwardness. In its place was a wide-eyed earnestness, and a tendency to pat the knee of whoever was sitting beside him.

Zizhen took this patting without complaint, though that may be because he didn't seem to have noticed. He wasn't red, but his eyes were brighter, if a little glazed, and he smiled more quickly and readily than he had before. Every so often he got distracted, staring at the forest around them as if it held the answers to every question in the universe, but it wasn't a morose sort of searching. Instead, Zizhen seemed content, and when he was paying attention he laughed louder than anyone, often clutching his stomach and gasping for breath after someone told a bad joke, or a funny story.

Interestingly, the alcohol seemed to take its time taking an effect on Sizhui. For a long time, even as the world around him swayed gently, like a peaceful boat, Jingyi couldn't see that Sizhui was any different. He'd had four cups before he glanced up at Jingyi with eyes glazed over, and gave a strangely dopey smile.

"Da-ge," he mumbled, resting his head against Jingyi's good foot, only to wrinkle up his nose. "Your feet smell."

"Only when you put your nose right up to my shoe!" protested Jingyi, though he was too happy to really be offended.

"Hm," said Sizhui, standing up. "Is there more? I'd like some more, please."

"Water first," said Huaisang, pointing his own cup at Sizhui, who pouted. "One cup of water, then you can have more wine."

Immediately, Sizhui's pout became a smile, and he nodded eagerly. "Okay, Nie-gongzi!"

"Aiya, I've told you all, call me Nie-xiong," said Huaisang, waving his hand. "You say Nie-gongzi and I think I'm in trouble."

Sizhui gasped, whirling around and clutching the water jar he'd just grabbed as though it was a lifeline. "Are we in trouble?"

"No," said Jingyi, so Sizhui wouldn't panic. It was funny – when he held out his cup, his hand swayed side to side a little. "More please, Sizhui. No, not water!"

Sizhui nodded, slightly unsteady on his feet as he hurried back over with the wine, refilling Jingyi's cup. As he drank, Jingyi noticed Nie Huaisang watching him carefully. He couldn't actually tell how drunk the older man was – he didn't know him well enough to know if the snickering and giggling was alcohol induced, or just the way he was.

"You're watching me," he said, pointing towards Huaisang just to be clear who he was talking about.

"Yes," said the man shamelessly. "To make sure you don't fall off the tree stump."

Completely and utterly offended to the very *core* of his being, Jingyi drew himself upright. "I would not fall off the tree stump! I am very, uh... um... Sizhui, what's the word?"

"Huh?"

"The word, the word that I am! Why I won't fall down!"

Sizhui stared at him blankly.

"Not clumsy?" Zizhen supplied, and Jingyi nodded eagerly.

"That!" Jingyi insisted with a firm nod that made his head spin a little. "Not clumsy."

"I'm hungry," said Zizhen, and instantly Jingyi's stomach rumbled.

Huaisang nodded at the second basket. "It's full of snacks. Help yourself!"

Zizhen grinned, throwing a "Thank you!" over his shoulder as he scrambled over to the basket, returning with an armful of fruit that he handed out to everyone.

"I want to play again," declared Jingyi, because he did. "Let's play again!"

Grinning, Nie Huaisang re-dealt the cards.

Jingyi wasn't sure how much time passed that way, blissfully happy and warm and just a little bit dizzy, whiling away time playing cards and *laughing* – he didn't think he'd laughed this much since before Mo Manner! And didn't that seem like a lifetime ago...

Beside him, Zizhen sniffed. And then he sniffed again, and then he made a strange snuffling sound, and Jingyi glanced down –

His heart dropped down so fast he nearly fell off the tree stump.

"Zizhen!" he cried, and his friend looked up at him, tears streaming down his face.

Clenched in his fist was a plum, its juice trailing down his fingers onto the dirt below, and Jingyi was about to tell him there was no point crying about a crushed plum if he was the one to crush it, but then Zizhen's mouth opened, and he choked out,

"A-Niang loves plums, but... but she doesn't... she doesn't love..."

Blind panic flailed through Jingyi's mind as he tried to think of what to say, and he saw Nie Huaisang put down his cup. "Zizhen," Nie Huaisang said firmly, "it wasn't about you. It was about Wei-xiong, and –"

"They hate him more than they love me," Zizhen said, trembling, and Sizhui threw himself across the circle to fling his arms around Zizhen.

"Well, we don't!" he cried, hugging him tightly. "We don't, Zizhen we love you!"

"I – I know," sobbed Zizhen, hiding his face in Sizhui's shoulder. "But A-Die, A-Niang, they... they..."

"They suck!" yelled Jinling suddenly, his angry voice cracking over all of them. His face was growing redder and redder, and he slammed his fist down onto the ground beside him.

"They're the worst, Zizhen, they're horrible, and I'm going to take Fairy and –" He cut off, his eyes suddenly going wide and distant, and then he deflated, staring into the fire. "Oh..."

"They're – they're not h-horrible," Zizhen protested weakly. "I don't – I don't want anyone to h-hurt them, I don't – I just want – I just want them to –" He broke off, sobs overwhelming his words, and Sizhui looked up to exchange a horrified look with Jingyi. But Jingyi didn't know what to do either, especially when Zizhen raised his head again to choke, "Why? Why don't – why? What'm I supposed to do now? What do – am I supposed to hate them now?"

"I do," Jingyi muttered, but perhaps he shouldn't have, because Zizhen flinched.

Standing up, Nie Huaisang came closer, handing Zizhen a handkerchief. "You don't have to hate them. Not if you don't want to. You don't 'have' to do anything. They're people, Zizhen. They can do horrible things – they *have* done horrible things – but they've also done good things. They might have been good parents to you before. But people change, Zizhen, for good and for bad, and you can't control that. They might change their minds. If you want to leave the door open for them, that's up to you. But as far as I'm concerned, as far as I can see, they don't deserve you."

Zizhen blew his nose, and looked tearfully at Nie Huaisang. "You... you hardly know me..."

"And yet I know that," said Huaisang.

"Oh!" said Sizhui, drawing back slightly to meet Zizhen's eyes. "If, if you want to, Zizhen, you can share my fathers! They, they both love you already, I *know* they do! If you want to. And even if you don't want to, they still love you. But think about it! We can share."

Zizhen took a deep breath and nodded, leaning into Sizhui's embrace, but then his eyes widened. "Jinling! What's wrong?"

Jingyi looked up, and to his horror he saw Jinling cuddling his knees to his chest, sobbing silently into them.

“Nothing!” Came the muffled yell. “You’re – it’s nothing!”

“Jinling!” Sizhui cried, glancing between him and Zizhen and looking incredibly distressed that he couldn’t reach to hug them both at once. “What’s wrong?”

“I miss Fairy, okay?!” Jinling yelled, looking up at them. “And – and it’s stupid and spoiled and selfish to because Zizhen – but I do, I miss her, and I want her here and she’s never going to *be* here!”

“She will!” insisted Sizhui. “She’s just not born yet.”

“No,” keened Jinling, “because, because Wei Wuxian is afraid of dogs, and, and that means Jiujiu won’t let me have her this time!”

“Wait, what?” Jingyi drew back. “That’s not true.”

“It is!” wailed Jinling. “And it’s so funny when Fairy’s here because he’ll scream and run away like a madman and it’s *funny* but now it’s not because Fairy’s gone, and I can’t ever get her back!”

“It’s not,” Zizhen hiccupped, “not selfish. Or stupid. She was your best friend. Of course you –” another hiccup “-miss her.”

Jinling glance up at Zizhen, his lip trembling. “I t-told you,” he said, “-d-didn’t I? I didn’t have f-friends before. Before now. But I did have Fairy. And – and I – I would rather have all of you. But I’d rather-rather have Fairy too.”

“Jinling!” Sizhui cried again, detaching himself from Zizhen to throw flailing arms around Jinling instead. “We love you too!” He took a deep breath, and then looked up at Jingyi. “*Jingyi!* Why are *you* crying?”

“I’m not!” Jingyi protested, wiping his cheeks. “It’s just that everyone else is! Nie-xiong, this was a terrible idea!”

“Okay, I wouldn’t go that far,” said Nie Huaisang, sounding a little affronted.

“Everyone!” Sizhui declared, rising to his feet. “Stop crying! Be happy. I need to pee. I’m going to pee.”

“Don’t go far!” Huaisang yelled as Sizhui wandered into the forest.

Jingyi stared glumly into the fire, wondering how he’d gone from feeling so happy to so sad. If this was what happened when people drank he didn’t want to do it again. He sniffed, wiping his nose on his sleeve.

“It’s alright,” Huaisang murmured, passing Zizhen another handkerchief, and another cup. “Have some water. That’s it.”



Zizhen took a deep, trembling breath, sipping at the water and wiping his face, and Jingyi sighed.

Suddenly, somewhere in the woods Sizhui squealed, and then crashed back through the forest with more noise than Jingyi had ever heard from him.

“Look what I found!” he cried excitedly, dragging two large wheelbarrows behind him.

“Look! Zizhen, look! Look what I found!”

“Wheelbarrows,” said Jinling blankly. “You have found wheelbarrows. I don’t think that’s very exciting – we’re pretty close to the orchard, of course there’s going to be wheelbarrows.”

Ignoring Jinling completely Sizhui ran around the clearing, filling the wheelbarrows with pillows, and then he grabbed Zizhen’s hand, yanking him to his feet.

“C’mon, c’mon, this’ll make you feel better!” he said, beaming so brightly he clearly believed every word, and then he tugged Zizhen over to the wheelbarrow, picked him up, and put him down carefully inside. Then, he wheeled the other barrow over to Jingyi.

“What are you doing?” Jingyi asked suspiciously, but Sizhui just plucked him off of his tree stump and plonked him into the wheelbarrow instead, before running back to Zizhen and taking the handles of that wheelbarrow.

“Jinling, we’ll race you! To that tree there and back!” he laughed, and then he began to drive the wheelbarrow as fast as he could around the clearing and into the forest. Nie Huaisang yelped, leaping out of the way, but Jinling gave a bark of laughter and leapt to his feet, and the next thing Jingyi knew he was shooting through the forest in a rickety wheelbarrow.

Jinling whooped, and Zizhen was laughing again, laughing and laughing and laughing, and Jingyi laughed too, holding up his hands – though then Jinling steered him over a tree root, and he flew halfway out of the barrow.

“Argh! Jinling, be careful where you’re steering!”

“You steer if you don’t like it!”

“My ankle is still broken!”

“Jiang Cheng, is that –”

“What the-”

Jinling screeched, stopping so suddenly he lost balance and stumbled sideways, and the next thing Jingyi knew he was flying out of the wheelbarrow –

And landing in a bush. Luckily, his injured foot was still dangling off the ground, so *that* wasn’t a disaster, but still...

“Ow...”

“What the hell is going on?” yelled – uh oh, that was *Jiang Cheng’s* yell.

*When did he get here? This can’t be good.*

“Jiujiu! Wei Wuxian!” Jinling said, but then he broke off, and his voice sounded sad. “Wei Wuxian, are – are you sad I don’t call you Jiujiu too? Because I – I think that it makes A-Niang sad that I don’t but I don’t know – I don’t know what to do because before everything was different and-”

“Oh my god,” said Wei Wuxian, and Jingyi couldn’t tell whether he sounded horrified or thrilled. “Are you drunk? Did Huaisang get you drunk?”

“No! Yes. Maybe. You’re drunk!” declared Jinling.

“How’d you know Huaisang’s here?” wondered Jingyi aloud.

“He left a note,” said Wei Wuxian, definitely sounding amused now.

Jiang Cheng groaned. “That’ll be a yes to the drunk, then. *Huaisang!*”

“I like it,” said Jinling and it sounded like he was pouting, which was all well and good, but –

“Can someone get me out of the bush? There’s leaves up my nose!” Jingyi yelled.

“Why don’t you just climb out?” demanded Jinling, and Jingyi sighed, wiggling his good foot.

“Broken. Ankle.”

“Which is a very good reason why you shouldn’t be doing drunken wheelbarrow races,” said Wei Wuxian, but as he was saying it he was also helping Jingyi out of the bush, and then he was carrying him like a baby. Jingyi’s stomach swayed weirdly. “Are you hurt? Where are your crutches?”

“No,” said Jingyi, rubbing his nose. “Not here. By the fire.”

“Right. Come on then, let’s get you back to the fire and yell at Huaisang.”

“Wait!” Jinling cried, looking hopefully up at Jiang Cheng. “Jiujiu... will you push me?”

“Oh, for the love of...” Jiang Cheng muttered, but then he rolled his eyes and gestured to the wheelbarrow. “Get in.”

Jinling agreed eagerly, and Wei Wuxian followed their trail back to the little clearing, while Jiang Cheng steered Jinling along behind them.

When they got to the clearing, Sizhui was driving Zizhen in circles around the fire, the pair of them giggling as Nie Huaisang cheered them on. However, the second he saw Jiang Cheng and Wei Wuxian, Nie Huaisang gasped, hiding his face behind his fan.

“Xian-gege!” Sizhui cried, his eyes lighting up. “Have you come to race with us?”

“I’ve come to make sure Huaisang hadn’t got you all killed,” said Wei Wuxian wryly. “And apparently I was right to.”

“No!” gasped Sizhui. “Nie-xiong, Nie-xiong was helping!”

“We feel better now,” said Zizhen, and Jingyi felt Wei Wuxian sigh.

“What the hell were you thinking, getting them drunk?” demanded Jiang Cheng, wheeling Jinling into the clearing.

“They’re all older than we were when we drunk at Cloud Recess,” Huaisang said, sounding strangely unthreatened. “Except Jinling, who *is* that age. But I’ve been looking after them. And your cups are still in the basket.”

Jiang Cheng narrowed his eyes. “Our cups?”

“Well, I can’t just *invite* you for drunken shenanigans anymore,” said Nie Huaisang. “You’re a sect leader, and you’re a father. So you don’t want to be seen sneaking out with us. But there’s nothing to stop you drinking now you’re here.”

Jinling gasped, grabbing Jiang Cheng’s sleeve. “Jiujiu! Jiujiu stay!”

“Xian-gege, you too, you too!” Sizhui begged, and Jingyi nodded.

“And tell me one good reason why we shouldn’t just drag you back to Lotus Pier and let Hanguang Jun deal with you?” said Jiang Cheng.

“I haven’t had a turn being pushed yet,” said Sizhui sadly, and Wei Wuxian snickered.

“Please stay,” said Zizhen quietly, his eyes round and sad. “We were having fun. It’d be nice if you stayed.”

Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng exchanged a glance, and then Jiang Cheng sighed, smiling a little sadly at Zizhen.

“Well,” he said quietly, “we’re sure as hell not going to say no to that.”

“Push us!” Jinling cried excitedly. “Jiujiu, you push me and Jingyi and Wei Wuxian can push Sizhui and Zizhen and we can race! We can race! Nie-xiong can be judge! Let’s race.”

“Ooh, yeah! Let’s race!” Jingyi enthused, and Wei Wuxian glanced down at him.

“Do you remember me dragging you out of a bush, Jingyi? Because that just happened, and is likely to happen again if we push you around in a wheelbarrow.”

“I’m tough!” Jingyi protested. “I can take it.”

“I’m sure you can, but you also have a broken ankle.”

“Pfft!” scoffed Jingyi, scowling. “I’m full strength! I could fight a bear! Find me a bear, I’ll show you!”

“That’ll be a definite no,” said Wei Wuxian lightly, putting Jingyi down on one of the pillows.

“No!” Jingyi protested again. “It’s easier to get up from the tree stump! That’s my tree stump, so I can get up easily!”

“That’s the point,” said Wei Wuxian, and Jingyi pouted.

“But... but I haven’t had a turn,” Sizhui said, and Wei Wuxian rolled his eyes.

“Okay, in the barrow with you, little radish!”

Gleefully, Sizhui swapped places with Zizhen, who came over to sit beside Jingyi, and Wei Wuxian ran the wheelbarrow around the clearing and through the trees a few times. Shaking his head, Jiang Cheng helped Jinling out of the other wheelbarrow and took a cup of wine from Huaisang.

“Can I have one please?” asked Jingyi, and Jiang Cheng promptly handed him a cup of water. “No!”

“Yes,” said Jiang Cheng. “Drink it.”

“I still think I could take on a bear,” Jingyi muttered mutinously, taking a reluctant sip of water, and Zizhen patted his knee.

“I think you could, too, Jingyi,” he said.

“Give me strength...” sighed Jiang Cheng, and Jingyi frowned.

“Here, Jiujiu!” said Jinling, sprawling himself across his uncle’s lap.

Jiang Cheng raised his eyebrows. “What are you doing?”

“You said give you strength,” said Jinling earnestly. “I’m strong.”

Jiang Cheng laughed, ruffling Jinling’s hair. “Get up, you little fool.”

Eventually, Wei Wuxian and Sizhui came down to sit with them too, Sizhui leaning against his father’s shoulder.

“Xian-jiujiu!” Jinling declared suddenly, sitting up and then immediately grabbing his head. “Oh – dizzy...”

“Steady on,” Jiang Cheng warned, and Jinling shook his head slightly.

“Uh... anyway. You should be Xian-jiujiu,” said Jinling firmly, looking at Wei Wuxian. “Jiujiu’s just Jiujiu, but you’re Xian-jiujiu. Even though you weren’t before. So there.”

Wei Wuxian's mouth dropped open, tears shining in his eyes even as a huge smile spread across his face. "Really?"

"Mn!" said Jinling, nodding grandly and beaming.

"Thank you, A-Ling!" Wei Wuxian grinned, holding out his arms, and Jinling tumbled into them readily. "I love you very much, A-Ling."

"Love you too, Xian-jiujiu!"

Beside Jingyi, Zizhen sniffed, and Jingyi looked at him quickly. However, Zizhen was smiling.

"Can we play another game?" he asked quietly, and Nie Huaisang nodded.

"We can play for as long as you'd like," he said firmly, and Jingyi leant against Zizhen's side, slinging his arm around his friend's shoulders and cuddling close.

"We love you," he reminded Zizhen, and Zizhen nodded, letting his head lean against Jingyi's shoulder.

"I know," Zizhen whispered.

"You better," Jingyi said, watching Huaisang deal out the cards. "You better."

## Chapter End Notes

NOTE: I just want to make a quick disclaimer that I think drinking to distract yourself from trauma/problems can be a risky, slippery slope and personally I wouldn't recommend it in real life! However, it did seem an in-character response for Huaisang, and spending time with good friends can often help things!

Thank you for reading, I really hope you enjoyed this chapter! Please do let me know what you thought if you have the time, I love hearing from you! Here's the link to the Spanish translation:

[https://www.wattpad.com/story/262943214?utm\\_source=android&utm\\_medium=link&utm\\_content=story\\_info&wp\\_page=story\\_details\\_button&wp\\_uname=freddieismyqueen\\_&wp\\_originator=m5qcAXX76kYBraareysIF5DxZEaOQhIWetvtqtoA3f7CCUbt2wARLqLn4qkcz0Vfvp2ZgTVDvMWO8GqMMY0m4W4CA87odrAHk4%2F%2Bw5gD2UkNg0QP5Ls4MiYGBfPEClp%2F](https://www.wattpad.com/story/262943214?utm_source=android&utm_medium=link&utm_content=story_info&wp_page=story_details_button&wp_uname=freddieismyqueen_&wp_originator=m5qcAXX76kYBraareysIF5DxZEaOQhIWetvtqtoA3f7CCUbt2wARLqLn4qkcz0Vfvp2ZgTVDvMWO8GqMMY0m4W4CA87odrAHk4%2F%2Bw5gD2UkNg0QP5Ls4MiYGBfPEClp%2F)

# Chapter 51

## Chapter Notes

Thank you for all your lovely comments regarding the last chapter! I love hearing from you all so much and I'm glad you're enjoying it!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The next morning, the smell of steamed dumplings lured Zizhen from sleep. He sniffed, shifting beneath the blankets and blinking his eyes open to find the room full of light. Glancing towards the window, he guessed that it was probably mid-morning. With a soft sigh, he rolled over towards the door to see where the smell of food was coming from.

It was Wei Wuxian, carrying a tray of breakfast and tea with a wry smile. “Good morning. Did I wake you?”

“Morning,” Zizhen mumbled, his words muffled by a yawn as he sat up in bed. “Are those dumplings?”

Wei Wuxian laughed softly. “Yep. I know you like them. How’re you feeling – any sign of a hangover?”

Zizhen stifled another yawn and catalogued how he was feeling, before shaking his head slightly. It felt like there was a great, heavy stone in his chest, weighing down on his heart, but he didn’t think that had anything to do with the alcohol. “I don’t think so... just a bit tired and thirsty...”

“Good,” said Wei Wuxian, his smile turning fond. “Jingyi and Jinling aren’t doing quite so well – they look about as good as Jiang Cheng did the first time he was hungover.” He glanced down at the tray and nodded slightly towards the nearby table. “Would you like breakfast in bed, or at the table?”

“I can get up,” Zizhen said, fumbling his way out of bed, and Wei Wuxian nodded, putting the tray down.

“Do you mind if I join you?”

“Of course not,” Zizhen said, rubbing his eyes as he moved over to the table. Wei Wuxian sat down casually, pouring two cups of tea and passing one to Zizhen.

“Great,” said Wei Wuxian, nodding the food. “Eat! I’ve had mine already.”

Nodding absently, Zizhen made himself comfortable and filled his bowl. Beside him, Wei Wuxian sipped at his tea, and for a while they sat in comfortable silence. It was nice, and the

food was good – very good.

Eventually, Wei Wuxian sighed, and put down his cup. “Zizhen... I understand if it’s too soon, but I’d like to talk to you for a minute about the future. About what happens now.”

Zizhen swallowed, hard, and put down his bowl.

“I don’t want to go into it too much!” Wei Wuxian said, reaching out and squeezing his wrist. “But there’s a couple of things I want to make sure are clear, okay?”

Zizhen’s heart skipped a beat and stumbled faster, and a painful lump rose in his throat. He lowered his eyes, but nodded.

“Firstly... I know in the beginning it was just to keep you safe, but I want to make sure you know that you have a real place here. In this family, in Lotus Pier, and in Yunmeng Jiang.”

Tears burnt in the back of Zizhen’s eyes, and he glanced up at Wei Wuxian quickly. Wei Wuxian frowned slightly, concern and guilt and pain clear in his eyes.

“If that’s a surprise, Zizhen, I’m sorry,” he said, his voice breaking. “We should’ve made things clearer, we, we’re...” He gave a sad, breathless laugh. “We’re not very good at that in this family...”

“I...” Zizhen swallowed, looking down. “I know you all... I know you all care about me, I do, I... but until... until the day before yesterday, I... thought I was still... still... Ba – still Ba-” His throat tightened, strangling the name of his clan before it could leave his mouth. He squeezed his eyes shut, pursing his lips tightly to try and keep from sobbing.

“I’m sorry,” Wei Wuxian murmured, after a lingering moment. “But I hope you know that even if things had gone differently, even if they’d whisked you away then and there, you would still have a place in this family, too, Zizhen. Always.”

The heavy stone in Zizhen’s chest cracked, pain seeping out like acid even as the pressure eased, as the weight grew just a little lighter, as he breathed ever so slightly deeper.

Somehow – inexplicably – Zizhen believed him.

There was a small, frightened part of his mind that was worried he shouldn’t. After all, he had always believed that he would be Baling Ouyang forever, that the only family he’d ever known would *always* love and protect him, and that belief had shattered. There was no logical reason that things should be different with bonds he’d formed in a matter of weeks, that there was no reason for this family to be more secure, but... he believed it.

He didn’t know how. He knew if Wei Wuxian’s words fell through, he’d be unlikely to ever recover.

But he believed it.

So he took a deep breath, and forced himself to open his eyes, and look at Wei Wuxian, and say, “I know.”

Wei Wuxian gave a sad smile, squeezing his wrist. “Good,” he whispered, before clearing his throat. “In regards to the Jiang Clan, Jiang Cheng and I really should’ve made that clearer sooner, but we didn’t realise we needed to... I know it started out as a disguise, a way to stop people questioning where you came from, but if you want an official place in Yunmeng Jiang, Zizhen, it’s yours.”

Zizhen’s head was spinning a little, and he picked up his teacup with trembling fingers, draining it in one go.

“I know it’s a big thing,” said Wei Wuxian. “We don’t need an answer right away. Even if you don’t become an official disciple, we’ll look after you. We meant what we said. We don’t want you to go anywhere.”

Nodding slowly, Zizhen put down his teacup, staring out over the breakfast Wei Wuxian had brought him. His favourite dumplings. The tea blend he’d mentioned loving off-hand two weeks ago. A bowl of congee, with a little paperman leaning against it. It wasn’t an active talisman, instead baring the words ‘Not made by Wei Wuxian and not spicy, I promise!’

“I want to,” he said, his stomach swooping as though he’d just dropped from his sword. Never in all his life had he imagined defecting, belonging to a clan other than Baling Ouyang, and part of him still cringed away from it. But he swallowed, steeling himself, and met Wei Wuxian’s eyes. “If – if you’ll have me.”

“Of course we will,” said Wei Wuxian immediately, looking relieved. It was so open an expression that Zizhen nearly cried, but then Wei Wuxian became solemn again, and sighed. “There’s one more thing that... well, we’ve got to talk about it sooner rather than later... If you continue to use the name Wei, it’s... I am well aware it will likely make your parents more upset. I don’t want to drive a wedge between you, Zizhen, I really don’t. So, if you want to choose a different name, you can. If you want to keep going by Wei Zizhen, I – I would be honoured. But my honour is not more important than your happiness.”

He was right. Zizhen knew he was right. The fact that he’d ever even thought of accepting the name ‘Wei’ was likely one of the things his parents were angry about it, something they’d see as him choosing Wei Wuxian over them.

But they’d cast him away.

And in the end...

In the end...

“I’d be proud to keep going by the name ‘Wei,’ if it really is alright with you.”

Wei Wuxian grinned, so brightly it almost distracted Zizhen from the tears in his eyes, and then he gave a laugh that was at least half a sob. “It’s more than alright with me, if you’re sure?”

“I am,” Zizhen promised.



“Good,” said Wei Wuxian, wiping his eyes. Then, he nodded at Zizhen’s breakfast. “Go on, eat up or it’ll get cold. All my slaving away in the kitchen will be a waste.”

“You didn’t cook this,” said Zizhen, pointing at the paper man note, and Wei Wuxian pretended to scowl.

“Aiya, don’t disrespect your elders like that. Even if I am barely three years older than you. I wonder if that will ever stop feeling strange?”

Smiling slightly, Zizhen returned to his dumplings.

“Now, would you prefer a view of the lake or not?” Zizhen frowned slightly, and Wei Wuxian elaborated. “If you had a preference, would you rather look at the lake, or be tucked further into Lotus Pier? For your rooms?”

“My rooms?” Zizhen repeated, and Wei Wuxian nodded seriously.

“You’re inner family. That means you get your own rooms. Jiang Cheng and Jianyu are trying to figure out where everyone’s going, and of course it’ll likely be when the Wen village is more fully constructed since everywhere else is full to the brim at the moment, but still, the time for planning is now.”

“Inner family?” Zizhen’s voice broke slightly, and Wei Wuxian nodded.

“Inner family.” He reached out and ruffled Zizhen’s hair. “You’re stuck with us now. Congratulations.”

Zizhen hid his smile in his teacup.

Over the next few days, the pain in Zizhen’s chest grew easier to bear, and he was pretty sure it was because there were so many people helping him carry it. Sizhui, Jingyi, and Jinling rarely left his side, distracting him until he wanted to talk, and then listening as best they could. Jingyi and Jinling both struggled, at times, to hide their obvious anger at Zizhen’s family, but they *tried* not to show it, and he appreciated that. He loved his clan and his family, and he loved his parents, and it made him uncomfortable to hear them scorned or threatened.

But a small part of him was also very grateful that they were angry in the first place. He was too tired and too hurt to be angry himself, but he couldn’t help but wonder if he should be. With Jinling and Jingyi so obviously seething on his behalf, he didn’t think he needed to be.

Sizhui never said whether or not he was angry, but he was by far the best at listening, and was very good at squeezing Zizhen’s hand or changing the subject if he saw him getting uncomfortable. He never cringed or panicked when Zizhen’s eyes filled with tears, and never failed to notice when Zizhen needed a hug.

Zizhen didn’t think he’d ever had so many hugs in his life. It wasn’t just Jingyi, Jinling, and Sizhui beside him – Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng slung their arms around him at least twice a day, and at every lunch and dinner Jiang Yanli would come around to kiss his cheek and make sure that he was eating enough. Little A-Yuan and A-Yu didn’t know what was

happening, but they had both picked up on the way people were acting around Zizhen and regularly attached themselves to his legs or launched into his arms for a cuddle.

Even Lu Meilin had looked at him and clicked her tongue, shaking her head and pulling him into a hug. “Your parents are fools,” she said firmly. “I am glad to know that Jingyi and Sizhui have as wonderful a brother as you.”

Nie Huaisang, Jin Zixuan, and Lan Wangji didn’t hug him, unsurprisingly, but they did rally around him too. Huaisang would drag him and the others away for card games or trips into Lotus Cove, and Jin Zixuan took him aside and very awkwardly told him that he was sorry, and that if there was anything he could do, he would do it. For the most part, Lan Wangji’s support was silent. He glared at people who brought up Baling or family dramas in front of Zizhen, and now and again offered him the small smiles that were usually reserved for Sizhui and A-Yuan.

For seven days, the weight in Zizhen’s chest grew lighter as his friends – his family – took it from him piece by piece.

But then they received word from Nie Mingjue.

“With the investigation coming to a close it’s been agreed that the best thing to do will be to hold a cultivation conference to publicise the results. However, the clans will expect both Wei Wuxian and Meng Yao there to provide an account – there have also been requests to hear again from Wei Zizhen and Lan Haoran following their previous testimony in Lanling, as well as requests to hear from Wen Qing and Wen Ning as representatives of the Wen remnants. Additionally, Lanling Jin have also requested the presence and account of Yu Jinling – Jin Zixun has accused him of impersonating a member of their sect, and other sect leaders have insisted that as a witness to the ambush at Qiongqi Pass it would be pertinent for him to attend the conference. As such, I am arranging to hold the conference in Qinghe, that I may do more to ensure the protection of the afore mentioned. An official invitation will follow, but I thought prior knowledge might be appreciated under the circumstances. With any luck, this conference shall mark the end of this matter, that we can put it behind us.” Nie Huaisang wrinkled his nose. “After that it’s mostly just telling me to behave,” he said, sounding a little put out. “Urgh... I hate cultivation conferences...”

Zizhen felt cold.

With trembling fingers, he put his chopsticks down, forcing himself to take a slow, deep breath.

It made sense to end the investigation with a conference, he knew that – it was the best way to make sure that everyone knew what it was Jin Guangshan and Jin Guangyao had done, the best opportunity they could have to clear Wei Wuxian’s name, but –

But –

“I don’t mind going,” said Wei Wuxian, frowning. “But I don’t want Wen Qing or Wen Ning anywhere near the Jin sect. No offense, Peacock.”

“None taken,” said Jin Zixuan mildly. “But I do think it would help improve public opinion of the Wen to see them and hear from them, if they are willing to go.”

“We are somewhat capable of taking care of ourselves, Wei Wuxian,” said Wen Qing mildly, taking a sip of her tea, though Zizhen thought there was a tightness in her eyes when she glanced at her brother. She sighed. “If we do not go, it will look like we have something to hide.”

“But-” Wei Wuxian began, but Nie Huaisang cut him off.

“Da-ge will make sure you’re safe,” he said firmly, nodding at Wen Qing. “All of you, for that matter. That’ll be why he’s holding the conference at Qinghe – he hates hosting, and tries to get out of it as much as possible. But in Qinghe, he has control over the environment. He can keep everyone safe.”

Wei Wuxian scowled, crossing his arms over his chest. “I still don’t like it.”

“No one’s asking you to,” said Jinling grumpily. “No one likes it. I know that we said it was Lan Haoran and not Jingyi who ‘witnessed’ the ambush at Qiongqi Pass, but why wasn’t Sizhui mentioned, if Zizhen and I were?”

“Outside of this room, the only people who know he was there are Da-ge, Xichen-ge, and Lan Qiren,” said Nie Huaisang. “He wasn’t ever named as anyone of importance, and I don’t think most of the clans really care who, exactly, any of you were. As far as they’re concerned, you’re just children who stumbled into something bigger than you anticipated. But they’ve heard from Zizhen and Lan Haoran before, so they know to ask for them. And if that awful slug of a man Zixun has accused you of impersonating his clan they’ll try and use that to deflect from their guilt.”

“Great,” muttered Jinling, but Jin Zixuan put a hand on his wrist.

“We’ll fix that, A-Ling, don’t worry,” he told his son, and Zizhen’s heart twisted painfully in his chest.

Beside him, A-Yuan shifted, patting his arm. “Zhen-gege? Are you okay?”

Zizhen nodded, forcing himself to smile weakly at the little boy. “I’m okay,” he said, but his voice came out as a whisper.

“Hm,” A-Yuan hummed, sounding unconvinced. “Are you sure? Your face has gone snowy.”

Immediately, Sizhui looked up from A-Yuan’s other side, his face creasing in concern.

“Zizhen?”

He opened his mouth, but as he did his throat tightened, and he pursed his lips shut, closing his eyes for a moment. “My...” he swallowed again, and then opened his eyes again. “My f-Sizhui, my father will be there.” Sizhui’s eyes pinched, and he reached past A-Yuan to put a hand on Zizhen’s arm, and Zizhen shook his head. “I don’t – I don’t know if I can – I –”

With a start, he realised that everyone was looking at him, and he felt his cheeks burn. He looked down quickly.

“Fuck,” Wei Wuxian muttered, and Lan Wangji looked reprovingly at him.

“Wei Ying...”

But Wei Wuxian didn't even glance at Lan Wangji, instead looking at Zizhen. “Perhaps... perhaps if we say you're night hunting, or...” but the suggestion was weak, and Zizhen knew why.

He had been asked for by name. If he didn't go, that would raise more questions at best. At worst, it would be taken as great disrespect from both Zizhen himself, and the Jiang Clan.

“I have to go,” he said, his voice trembling slightly. “Don't I?”

“You don't have to say a single word to Ouyang-zongzhu,” said Jiang Cheng sharply. “And if he comes anywhere near you I'll break his face.”

“His face?” asked A-Yuan, looking confused. “Is that I love you, too? It sounds more angry.”

“No, that means Jiujiu wants to *actually* break someone's face, because they're a terrible person,” said Jinling, and Zizhen's gut churned.

“Oh,” said A-Yuan, looking between Jiang Cheng and Zizhen with wide eyes. “Zhen-gege, Zhen-gege, has someone been mean to you?”

“That's enough, A-Yuan,” Lan Wangji said gently, and A-Yuan glanced at him. “The matter is complicated. You do not need to worry.” He paused, something softening in his expression. “However, you may help Zizhen with a hug, should he wish it.”

A-Yuan nodded, turning his big eyes back to Zizhen. “Do you wish a hug, Zhen-gege?”

Despite himself, Zizhen couldn't help but smile slightly, holding out his arms a little. “That would be nice.”

A-Yuan flung himself at Zizhen, hugging him tightly, and Zizhen took a deep breath.

It was too soon, far too soon to see his father. But he wasn't alone.

He could survive it.

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading, and for continuing to engage with this long story! Until next time, please take care :)



## Chapter 52

### Chapter Notes

Hi there! Sorry for the delay in this chapter, and thank you for the lovely comments on the last one! I hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Dread weighed in Wei Wuxian's gut, and he dragged his feet as he made his way to his rooms. The sun was beginning to set, spilling an array of colour out over the lake, and Wei Wuxian was out of time. For days, he'd been putting off telling A-Yuan that A-Die and Baba would be leaving for *another* trip, but it wasn't fair to wait any longer. Tomorrow, they would be leaving for Qinghe. He needed to tell A-Yuan tonight.

He didn't want to. With a sigh, Wei Wuxian reached his own door, raising his hand to open it –

And then he paused.

Inside, Sizhui was reading aloud from a book of fairy-tales, his voice somehow both calm and dynamic at the same time, just perfect for story-telling, and despite everything, Wei Wuxian felt warmth bloom in his chest. As quietly as he could, he peeked around the door, and his heart melted. Sizhui was sitting in A-Yuan's little bed, with A-Yuan snuggled so close that he was half-in Sizhui's lap. Either Lan Zhan or Sizhui had already got A-Yuan into his pyjamas, and his little toy rabbit Luobo was in his arms as he listened, enraptured, to Sizhui's story, and it was just too adorable for Wei Wuxian's heart to handle.

A-Yuan knew that Sizhui was, as A-Yu had called it, 'his Big Me.' He'd been present for far too many conversations not to have picked up on it. Wei Wuxian had explained as best – and as briefly – as he could, as well as emphasising that it had to be kept a secret, and A-Yuan had been hilariously unfazed by the whole thing. He just seemed happy to have another gege, and he adored Sizhui.

It made Wei Wuxian so happy.

"...and that's the end," Sizhui said, closing the book and smiling down at A-Yuan.

"I like that one!" A-Yuan said, snuggling against Sizhui and looking up. His eyes lit up. "A-Die!"

"Hello, my little radishes!" said Wei Wuxian, coming into the room with a smile. He glanced over his shoulder to see Lan Zhan meditating by the table, though he opened his eyes to smile softly at Wei Wuxian. "Did Zhui-gege tell a good story tonight?"

“Mn!” A-Yuan said, nodding emphatically, but behind him Sizhui was looking meaningfully at Wei Wuxian, and Lan Zhan was standing up and walking over, and Wei Wuxian knew that they were ganging up on him. Making sure he did what he had to do.

He forced himself not to sigh – the lighter a matter he made this seem, the better A-Yuan would take it. Hopefully.

“Right, A-Yuan,” he said, pinching his son’s cheek. “Tomorrow, Baba and I have to go on a little trip.”

A-Yuan stiffened, his smile falling away. “A trip?”

“Mn-hm,” said Wei Wuxian, nodding and poking A-Yuan’s nose. “We won’t be gone for very long – just a week or so – and then we’ll be back, okay?”

“No,” A-Yuan said with a frown, curling away from Wei Wuxian, back towards Sizhui. “No! A-Die and Baba stay here.”

“We won’t be long,” Wei Wuxian promised, “and after this we won’t have to go on so many trips anymore.”

A-Yuan’s frown darkened into a scowl. “A-Yuan will go too.”

“A-Yuan can’t go too,” said Wei Wuxian. “It will be very boring.”

“A-Yuan will go too!” A-Yuan’s lower lip was beginning to wobble. “You said A-Die and Baba and A-Yuan stay together now, you *said!*”

“I’m not going either, A-Yuan,” said Sizhui gently, squeezing the little boy’s shoulder. “And neither’s Yi-gege. And Li-gugu and Popo and Sishu will all be here to look after us.”

A-Yuan’s lip was trembling dangerously now as he looked up at Sizhui. “Zhui-gege, did they go away so much when *you* were Little A-Yuan?”

Sizhui stiffened, his eyes widening slightly as he looked helplessly at Wei Wuxian, who moved at once.

“Hey,” he said, lowering and sharpening his voice a little. “A-Yuan – what are the rules about Zhui-gege?”

A-Yuan looked away. “Don’t ask him ‘bout his before...”

“A-Yuan, look at me,” Wei Wuxian said seriously, waiting until the toddler mulishly met his eyes. “Why don’t you ask Zhui-gege about his before?”

“Because it’s a Big Rule,” A-Yuan recited glumly, and Wei Wuxian nodded.

“That’s right – it’s a Big Rule. And what is a Big Rule?”

“One that you can’t break.”

Standing behind Sizhui with a hand on his shoulder, Lan Zhan's eye twitched. Wei Wuxian knew he didn't like the concept of 'Big Rules' ("No rules are made to be broken, Wei Ying.") but at the end of the day there were rules that had to be taken more seriously than others – ones that were too dangerous to break. Don't go near the wards without a grownup. Don't go outside in Lotus Pier without a grownup. Don't tell anyone that Zhui-gege is really your older self.

"Why?" Wei Wuxian pressed.

"Because it's dangerous."

"Exactly," said Wei Wuxian gravely. "And not just that, you might upset Zhui-gege. His Before is gone now – there are parts of it that he misses."

A-Yuan's eyes widened, and he looked quickly up at Sizhui. "I'm sorry! Did I make you sad?"

"I'm alright, A-Yuan," Sizhui promised, but his voice was a little quiet, and there was a flicker of sorrow in his eyes as he glanced at Wei Wuxian.

Pain shot across Wei Wuxian's heart, sharp and crushing. When Sizhui was A-Yuan's age, Wei Wuxian had already left him, and Wei Wuxian hadn't come back. There was a pain in Lan Zhan's eyes that made Wei Wuxian suspect his thoughts were dwelling there, too, and it looked like Lan Zhan's hand was tightening on Sizhui's shoulder.

"I'm sorry," A-Yuan said again, looking sadly from Sizhui to Wei Wuxian. "But... but A-Die, I don't want you to go!"

"And I don't want to go," said Wei Wuxian, "but the sooner we go, the sooner we'll get back."

A-Yuan looked up at Lan Zhan. "Baba's going too?"

"Yes," said Lan Zhan, inclining his head. "But your A-Die is correct – we will not be gone long. We will be back soon."

Technically, Lan Zhan *could* stay in Lotus Pier – he hadn't been summoned to the conference, but he had refused to even consider letting Wei Wuxian go without him. Not while he was still known as the evil Yiling Patriarch, while there was still a chance of someone trying to take their shot at him.

Of course, telling A-Yuan that Baba was going because he was worried A-Die would be in danger would not help.

"Come here, little radish," Wei Wuxian said, holding out his arms, and A-Yuan crawled to the edge of the bed, wrapping his arms and legs around Wei Wuxian's chest and squeezing as though trying to suffocate him. "We don't want to go. It's just the way it is, okay? But one week, just one, and we'll be back."



A-Yuan whimpered slightly, burying his face in Wei Wuxian's neck. "Still don't want you to go. Are you *sure* A-Yuan can't come?"

"Very sure," said Wei Wuxian. "But, if you're lucky, we'll bring Bobo back with us, for a visit. How's that?"

"Bobo?" A-Yuan drew back, his eyes lighting up slightly.

"Yep," said Wei Wuxian, deciding then and there that after the damned conference was over Zewu Jun would be coming back to Lotus Pier whether he liked it or not. "And after that, if we *do* have to go on another trip, we'll take you with us, okay?"

"Okay," A-Yuan sighed, shaking his head and flopping back down onto the bed, folding his arms across his chest. "Don't like it though."

Wei Wuxian leant in and poked A-Yuan's nose. "I don't like it either. But it is what it is."

"Hmph..." A-Yuan stood up on the bed and clambered carefully over Sizhui's lap to hold his arms up towards Lan Zhan.

"Hey!" Wei Wuxian cried, pouting at Lan Zhan picked A-Yuan up. "Why are you going to him for comfort? He's leaving too! Why does Baba get all the cuddles? Am I being punished for being the bearer of bad news? A-Yuan! Betrayed! Sizhui, I'm betrayed!"

Sizhui smiled wryly. "There, there, Xian-gege."

A-Yuan giggled, and Wei Wuxian grinned, springing up to grab Sizhui and pull him into his arms.

"Oh, to have a filial son!" he cried, shaking his head dramatically, squashing his older son to his chest. "Lan Zhan, you can keep that A-Yuan – I shall keep the one who is loyal to me!"

"No, you have to keep me too," said A-Yuan, pouting, though he still kept his limbs locked around Lan Zhan. "You promised."

"Oh, I suppose then..." Wei Wuxian sighed, rocking Sizhui in his arms. Instead of protesting the way he'd have expected a teenager to, Sizhui wrapped his arms around Wei Wuxian. Instinctively, Wei Wuxian adjusted his grip to be less tight, more sincere.

"Love you, Xian-gege," Sizhui murmured quietly, and Wei Wuxian smiled.

"Love you, too," he whispered into Sizhui's hair.

"Oh!" cried A-Yuan excitedly, clearly either unaware or uncaring that Sizhui and Wei Wuxian were having a *moment*. "When you get back, can I learn how to swim? Will it be warm enough yet?"

"I don't think so, little radish," Wei Wuxian admitted, watching A-Yuan's face fall. "But it won't be *too* long after that. We'll have you swimming like a little fish in no time!" He

released Sizhui, though he couldn't resist pinching his cheek. "A-Zhui, it's about time for you to go meet the others."

Sizhui hesitated slightly, and Wei Wuxian smiled at him. He understood the hesitation – he wasn't thrilled about the idea of being away from Sizhui for a week, and he wanted to keep him close before they had to go, but it was also the longest that the four time-travellers were going to be apart since they'd arrived. They wanted to spend the evening together before Zizhen and Jinling left, and Wei Wuxian thought it was a good idea.

"I'll be awake when you get back," he promised, "and we'll have breakfast tomorrow. Go spend time with your friends."

"Okay," Sizhui said, though he glanced at Lan Zhan and waited for his nod before he got up. "I'll see you later."

"Wait, wait! Where're you going?" A-Yuan asked, and Sizhui smiled at him.

"Just to go and see Jinling and Zizhen – I'm not leaving Lotus Pier. I'm staying here with you."

"Ah... Good," said A-Yuan, nodding sombrely. "Then you can go."

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His baby was getting so big. Rulan was heavy in his arms now, and there was more strength in his little limbs when he flailed them happily around. The other day, Zixuan had seen him manage to roll over from his tummy onto his back, and he'd wondered how on earth so tiny a thing could make him feel so ridiculously proud.

Most importantly, most wonderfully, he had begun to smile. He was smiling at Zixuan now, a happy, gummy little smile, and even as his heart sung to see it, Zixuan could feel the back of his eyes sting with tears that weren't entirely born of happiness.

In the life that Jinling knew, Jin Zixuan had never got to see this. In that life, Zixuan had died before he ever got to see his baby smile.

Some days, he barely thought about it. Others, it weighed as a heavy grief on his heart.

It had been worse since he got to Lotus Pier – in the three weeks he had been away Rulan had grown so much, and it hurt that he had missed it, but it hurt worse that he missed *all* of it with A-Ling. He had missed A-Ling's first smile and his first laugh, his first steps and his first words – he had missed everything.

Rulan cooed, blissfully unaware of his father's sorrow, and Zixuan sighed, reaching down to kiss his baby's forehead.

"I love you," he murmured. "I love you."

The baby babbled back, and at that moment Yanli slipped into the room. The smile on her face faded slightly at the expression on Zixuan's.

“A-Xuan,” she said, concern in her voice as she came to his side. “What’s wrong?”

Zixuan sighed, shaking his head slightly. He’d been avoiding this conversation for days, but tomorrow he was due to return to Qinghe, and he didn’t want to leave without having it. It had taken him a while to put his thoughts into words, even inside his head.

“A-Ling’s with the others, right?” he said, and Yanli nodded.

“Yes,” she said slowly. “A-Xuan?”

He sighed again, meeting Yanli’s eyes. “A-Li... You should have told me when A-Ling had a qi deviation. It... it hurts me that you didn’t.”

Yanli winced slightly, guilt and sadness flickering across her eyes, and she put a hand on his arm. “I’m sorry, A-Xuan. I never meant to hurt you, I truly didn’t. I... I’ve been waiting for this conversation.” Her voice trembled slightly. “Can we sit down?”

Zixuan nodded, letting A-Li lead him over to the table, where they sat down. She hung her head, and then sighed softly.

“I understand why you’re angry, A-Xuan, I really do,” she began, but he shook his head.

“I’m not *angry*, A-Li,” he said, and she glanced up in surprise.

“You’re...” She shook her head slightly. “How can you not be? I would be furious if I were in your shoes, I...”

Zixuan sighed, looking down at Rulan. Even after more than a year of marriage, even with a wife who was quite possibly the best listener in the entire world, speaking freely of his feelings was still uncomfortable for Zixuan.

“I am hurt,” he said finally. “My son had a qi deviation, and I *wasn’t there*. I couldn’t protect him, I couldn’t be there for him, and – he – he could have *died*, A-Li.” His voice broke, and he had to fight not to hold Rulan tighter. If he held any tighter his baby could be hurt. “He could have died, and I didn’t even know anything was wrong. He is my *son*. I deserved to know, and it – it hurts that I wasn’t there. It hurts that I couldn’t help. I -” His voice cut off, strangled by the unshed tears in his throat, and he swallowed, closing his eyes. Took a deep breath. “I am upset. I am hurt, and frustrated, but I’m not angry.”

He looked up at his wife, taking in the confusion and guilt and hurt on her face, wondering how it was that even so, she was so breathtakingly beautiful.

“It took me a few days,” he said slowly, “but I did realise what hurt the most. A-Li, you’ve spent all of your life taking the worries and griefs of your family onto your shoulders. You tuck your own fears away, and you take every pain that you can from your brothers to bear yourself, so much so that you couldn’t imagine my returning to Lotus Pier doing anything other than add to your burden. But that is not what I want us to be. I want to carry your pain and your grief and your fear as much as you do mine.”

“A-Xuan...” Yanli whispered, her eyes full of tears, and she shook her head slowly. “I’m so sorry.”

“All I ask is that you *tell* me,” Zixuan insisted. “No matter what it is, no matter where I am or what I am doing, if something happens to you or to our children I beg that you *tell* me. If I leave tomorrow believing that – that if something happened to Rulan you would leave me in the dark, I – I won’t sleep until I get back, A-Li.”

“I will,” she said, nodding tearfully. “I swear. I’m sorry, A-Xuan, I truly am, I...”

“I know,” Zixuan murmured, feeling a lump rise in his throat. “But I also know that you’re carrying A-Ling’s nightmares, and Jiang Cheng’s fears, and Wei Wuxian’s heartaches, and I know that you won’t ever let them see how much they weigh on you. But you don’t have to carry them alone anymore, A-Li.”

“I... I’m not sure that I know how not to,” she murmured, and he met her eyes.

“Talk to me,” he said, and Yanli gave a watery laugh.

“A-Xuan...”

“I’m aware conversation is not my strongest skill,” he said dryly, and she smiled slightly. “But I *want* you to tell me. Please.”

“I will try,” Yanli promised, and at that moment Rulan began to whimper, and then cry, and Yanli sighed, smiling wryly as she shook her head.

“That is his hungry cry,” she said dryly, holding out her hands, and a little reluctantly Zixuan passed the baby over. It didn’t take him long to settle, and Zixuan reached out to put a hand on A-Li’s arm as he did.

“I love you,” he said, and Yanli smiled at him tearfully.

“I love you, too,” she replied. Then, after a moment she became very still, and said, “I don’t want you to go. I know that you must, and I understand it, but I wish you didn’t have to. I wish that A-Ling didn’t have to – that none of you did, really... It scares me. And I miss you so much when you’re not here.”

Zixuan smiled sadly. “I wish I didn’t have to go either. I’ve just got back to you...”

Yanli glanced down at Rulan. “Being here, being home, I – I wish my parents could have met them. Rulan and A-Ling, and the others, too.” She sighed, looking up at Zixuan again.

“You’ll – I know you will but – you’ll look after A-Ling while you’re away, won’t you?”

“I will,” he promised. “He will be fine.”

“He’s still having nightmares, some nights,” she worried. “He doesn’t like to talk about what happens in them, but he sometimes wants to talk around it, or even just to have someone there to hold him and tell him everything’s alright.”

“I know,” Zixuan said warmly, and Yanli’s shoulders relaxed slightly. “I’ll be back before you know it, A-Li. Everything will be fine.”

## Chapter End Notes

So we were SUPPOSED to get to the Cultivation Conference in this chapter but Jin Zixuan had Feelings so it didn't happen lol. I hope you enjoyed this short chapter, please do let me know if you did. Until next time, please take care x

# Chapter 53

## Chapter Notes

Thank you all for your lovely comments on the last chapter, and for your patience! I hope you enjoy this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Jinling was not happy to be in Qinghe.

He had never liked cultivation conferences, and he certainly didn't expect to like this one. Unfortunately, he didn't have a choice, because Jin Zixun – the man he'd been told was a hero, and the greatest thorn in the side of the Yiling Patriarch – had turned out to be an even bigger asshole than Jin Chan. In fact, the things Jinling had heard about Jin Zixun made him almost feel guilty about thinking of Jin Chan in the same sentence.

(Sometimes, he *did* feel guilty about it, but he still dreamt of the venom in his cousin's voice when he taunted Jinling for being an orphan, when he sneered that his mother was a fool for trusting Wei Wuxian, and that in going to Nightless City she had chosen to leave Jinling forever. After those dreams Jinling would hug his parents even tighter, and wonder if it was wrong to hate the toddler Jin Chan currently was.)

Jinling wasn't looking forward to seeing Jin Zixun again. He wasn't looking forward to meeting Jin Guangshan, and it was 'meeting' as far as he was concerned – his grandfather had died when Jinling was still very small, and he had no memories of him at all. He wasn't looking forward to listening to his own relatives try to defend their own evil by defaming Wei Wuxian. He already knew the bitter rhetoric they would spit out – he had spent a lifetime hearing nothing else. Hearing it, and believing it. He wasn't looking forward to Jin Zixun calling him a liar, accusing him of impersonating Lanling Jin to draw attention away from his own crimes.

And he was utterly dreading when Meng Yao would be called to testify.

He hadn't seen the man he once called Xiao-shushu since the time travel array was activated. His mother had asked him if he wanted to go to the dungeon to see him while they were still in Lotus Pier, but Jinling had refused. His feelings towards Meng Yao and Jin Guangyao were still far too complicated, and far too uncomfortable. During the journey from Lotus Pier to Qinghe, Jinling had caught a brief glimpse of Meng Yao with his head bowed and hands bound, but he had quickly looked away. Even so quick a glance had been enough to make a hundred feelings fight for space in his heart. The worst of them all was the grief, the constantly resurfacing part of him that missed his Xiao-shushu.

Jinling always quite liked the Unclean Realm – there, no one really knew him. There, it had never irked him quite so much that he had no friends to visit. He was supposed to have friends in Lanling, but between Jin Chan and his goons, and being away for half the year he had none. There was no one really his age at Lotus Pier, given how decimated the Jiang had been during the war. But in Qinghe, there was no reason why he *should* have had friends. It made the fact that he didn't a little easier to handle.

But now thinking about that just made him grumpier, because now he *had* friends, but Jingyi and Sizhui weren't here, and Zizhen was even glummer than he was. Jinling understood why, but he didn't know how to fix it, and he hated it.

They'd seen Ouyang-zongzhu last night. The Jiang delegation were being led to their rooms, and Ouyang-zongzhu and Yao-zongzhu were walking past. The Nie disciple showing them the way paused, but Jiang Cheng had strode straight onwards, steadfastly ignoring both other men, and though Zizhen, Wen Qing, and Wen Ning kept their heads down, every other Jiang disciple (including Jinling) had stared daggers at the clan leaders as they passed. Jinling wished he could *throw* daggers, too, but that would start a diplomatic incident to say the least.

More importantly, it would hurt Zizhen.

Luckily, a cultivation conference run by Nie Mingjue was nothing if not efficient, so they didn't have to suffer through days of forced pleasantries and small talk. Instead, the conference began the morning after they arrived. As grateful as he was for that, Jinling couldn't help the anxiety crawling through his stomach and up his throat as he and Zizhen followed their uncles, Wen Qing, and Wen Ning into the hall.

Nie Huaisang greeted them near the door, giving a smile that was just a bit tighter than usual. "Jiang-xiong, Wei-xiong, your seats are just up over there, if you please."

"Thank you, Nie-xiong," said Wei Wuxian warmly, and Nie Huaisang nodded.

When Jinling saw where, exactly, their seats were, a little of the anxiety ebbed away. They were almost at Nie Mingjue's right hand, separated from Chifeng-zun only by seats occupied by a few senior Nie sect members, and an empty space that was presumably Huaisang's.

Jiang Cheng sat down in the front row, obviously, with Wei Wuxian at his right hand, but he left an empty table to his left. Jinling and Zizhen sat behind Jiang Cheng, and beside them, behind Wei Wuxian, were Wen Qing and Wen Ning. Wen Qing was sitting ramrod straight, while Wen Ning seemed to be trying to make himself as small as possible.

To the right of the Jiang delegation were the Lan, with Lan Xichen and Lan Qiren in the front row, and Lan Wangji and Lan Haoran behind them. Wei Wuxian winked at Lan Wangji as he sat down, and to Jinling's embarrassment Hanguang Jun's ears turned red as he smiled.

Jinling was sure there was probably some bigger political meaning behind the seating arrangements, but he didn't care what it was. He was just grateful for it. If he had to sit through this horrible conference, at least he was able to do it surrounded by people he trusted.

“Nie-gongzi,” said the odious voice of Yao-zongzhu, “is this truly how you wish to conduct your conference – with the Ghost General sitting proud as if he is one of us?”

Jinling scowled, seeing Wen Ning (who had looked very far from proud in the first place) shrink down a little further, but Nie Huaisang gave a small laugh, opening his fan.

“Well, where else would he be, Yao-zongzhu?” he said, sounding mildly amused.

“He – he! He is a fierce corpse!” spluttered Yao-zongzhu, looking outraged, and Nie Huaisang shook his head slightly.

“Wen-gongzi has retained his consciousness,” he said slowly, before lowering his voice not nearly enough. “But Yao-zongzhu, if you are concerned that you cannot take a single fierce corpse in a fight I can ask Da-ge to assign you more guards, please don’t worry!”

Yao-zongzhu turned bright red. “I do not require more guards,” he said stiffly.

“Okay,” said Nie Huaisang. “Let me know if you change your mind! Your seat is over here.”

The room began to fill, the other clans’ delegations finding their seats, and Jinling’s heart picked up speed in his chest. When the Jin delegation walked in, his heart raced so fast it hurt as the man who had to be his grandfather took a seat opposite Jiang Cheng. Jin Zixun sat behind him.

A moment later, Jinling’s father walked in, wasting no time in walking up to Nie Mingjue and bowing.

“Nie-gongzi, given the subject of this meeting I do not feel that I can with good conscious sit by the side of Jin-zongzhu. I beg your leave as host to sit with my wife’s family instead.”

“Of course,” said Nie Mingjue, gesturing to the empty seat beside Jiang Cheng. Jinling watched Jin Guangshan turn a deep, dark red. There was an empty seat beside him.

And even when Nie Mingjue took his own seat, and the hall fell silent, the place beside Jin Guangshan remained empty.

“I assume,” said Nie Mingjue, somehow sounding nobler in two words than Yao-zongzhu ever had in his life, “that everyone knows why we are here. The primary purpose of this conference is to discuss the misconduct of the Jin sect, as revealed by the investigation into the camps at Qiongqi Pass.”

“Now, now, Nie-zongzhu,” said Jin Guangshan, his voice grating down Jinling’s spine. “I still contest any claim of misconduct. This is a conference, not a trial. Let us not speak of speculation as if it is hard fact. I would remind the conference that there is currently a demonic cultivator in their presence - a man who is known to have murdered countless people through –”

“Countless?” said Jiang Cheng sharply. “If we are not speaking of speculation as hard fact then where is your proof for such an accusation?”



“Jiang Cheng,” said Jin Guangshan, and Jinling bristled at the familiarity of the name. “I cannot take this conference seriously if Lanling Jin is to be touted as a greater issue than the Yiling Patriarch.”

“Then tell me, Jin-zongzhu, what is your issue with the Yiling Patriarch? What great evil has he done that you object to?”

“Jiang-zongzhu,” said a clan leader that Jinling didn’t know. “I recognise that clearly there was more at play at Qiongqi Pass than was initially claimed, or there would be no reason for this conference. However, it has been common knowledge for two years that Wei Wuxian and the Ghost General committed murder at Qiongqi pass, and you yourself have never contested this before – with the exception of the last meeting in Lanling. On the contrary - you declared that he had defected from Yunmeng Jiang and no longer held any association with you, yet here he sits at your side. Respectfully, Jiang-zongzhu, I would appreciate an account of this matter, and I would hear Wei Wuxian’s own account of Qiongqi Pass.”

“I understand, He-zongzhu,” said Jiang Cheng reasonably, inclining his head, and Jinling’s blood ran cold.

*He Su.* Jinling hadn’t recognised the man because his infamous fall had happened before Jinling’s first birthday. He had always known that the Tingshan He sect had been eliminated when he was a baby for trying to kill Jin Guangshan, that their evil and twisted sect leader had led them to their doom. He Su had been described as a power-hungry villain, cold and cruel, but he didn’t look much older than Jiang Cheng, and he had spoken quite reasonably, in Jinling’s opinion. Looking at the young man now, Jinling couldn’t help but wonder if the guilt of Tingshan He was also a lie. Either it was, and in the other timeline the young clan leader and his entire sect had been murdered for it, or the man was evil and twisted and plotting the downfall of the great sects. Either option made Jinling feel a little sick, but he was distracted from the macabre thoughts when his uncle continued speaking.

“As I expressed in Lanling, I regret allowing my brother to defect without a fight. I regret not standing with him then. I’m sure he would be happy to give his account.”

Wei Wuxian nodded, though he looked up at Nie Mingjue. “Nie-zongzhu, I am aware we’ve got a little off track from the initial plan for the conference... I’m happy to wait, or give my account now, as you see fit?”

Nie Mingjue gave Wei Wuxian a look that was surprisingly similar to the glares of dry exasperation Jiujiu used to give Jinling when he was older, and wearier, and amused and exasperated at the same time. “Give the account now, Wei-gongzi – perhaps then we will be able to get back on track.”

Wei Wuxian bowed his head. “Very well. To tell the truth, the full context of Qiongqi Pass, for me, began before the war. I befriended Wen Ning during the lectures at Cloud Recesses, and later during the indoctrination at Qishan he made the experience significantly more tolerable.”

“How?” interrupted one of the disciples behind Yao-zongzhu. “I don’t remember him making anything any easier.”

“Well, that’s because you didn’t get yourself thrown into the dungeon with a damned wolf for backchatting Wen Chao in the vegetable garden,” said Wei Wuxian lightly, though Jinling saw his uncle’s hand tighten a little around Chenqing. He remembered Wei Wuxian running away from Fairy in the marketplace, screaming like he was being pursued by a demon. It had been so funny at the time, but Jinling found the idea of his uncle being locked in a dungeon with a wolf far less amusing. “Wen Ning came by to put the damn thing to sleep and give me some medicine to keep me standing until the next morning.”

“Oh, I remember that!” said Nie Huaisang, waving his fan. “You looked really awful when they brought you back the next day, Wei-xiong.”

“Thanks,” Wei Wuxian said dryly. “In any case, later...” He paused, and his voice became heavier. “When Lotus Pier was destroyed by Wen Chao, Jiang Cheng was captured. When Wen Ning heard of the attack he came from Yiling at once. Without him, I would have never got Jiang Cheng out of Lotus Pier. He drugged Wen Chao’s wine, and carried Jiang Cheng to my boat himself. Then, he took us to Yiling, to Wen Qing. Jiang Cheng was injured...” He hesitated, glancing at Jiang Cheng, who nodded. Wei Wuxian swallowed, nodded back, and continued, “He was near death. Wen Qing saved him. They hid us, and our sister, until Jiang Cheng was well enough to travel. For this, they were imprisoned by the Wen clan. After we left Yiling, I didn’t see them until the day of the Phoenix Mountain Hunt.”

Zizhen’s elbow nudged into Jinling’s side, and with a start Jinling realised his mouth was hanging open. He shut it quickly, looking down at his hands. He hadn’t known that. Hadn’t known that his uncle would be dead without Wen Ning. The Jiang Cheng that had raised Jinling *hated* Wen Ning, and Jinling had grown up hating Wen Ning, too. Even before they came to the past, Jinling’s hatred for Wen Ning had begun ebbing away, and he hadn’t really had too much to do with him since, but now...

“I found Wen Qing in Lanling on the day of the hunt,” said Wei Wuxian, and Jinling wanted to hiss at him to stop, to wait and give him a moment to process, but of course he couldn’t do that. Instead, he had to listen to Wei Wuxian relate what Wen Qing had told him, had to listen to Wei Wuxian describe what he found at the camps, describe baby A-Yuan clinging to his grandmother’s back as she was forced to carry a spiritual lure flag.

Wei Wuxian described the state he found Wen Ning in. How they had returned to find the guards slaughtering prisoners to stop them from testifying, how they found the four guards who had killed Wen Ning. How they had killed them.

“I regret the grief caused to their families,” Wei Wuxian said finally, gravely. “But I do not regret taking their lives. Since then, I haven’t killed anyone, and neither has Wen Ning.”

“Ridiculous! I have heard of hundreds of murders attributed to you –” Yao-zongzhu began, but Wei Wuxian looked at him and he fell silent.

“Have you any proof for any of those claims? Can you even give me a name of a victim, beyond the friend of a friend’s cousin?” Wei Wuxian gave a bitter smile. “As Yiling Patriarch I was far too busy trying to survive in the Burial Mounds to run around robbing graves and sacrificing virgins, or whatever else the rumours say I did.” He paused for a moment. “If what I have said so far is not enough to convince the conference that I was wrong to rescue

the Wen, I understand. I hope that when the results of the investigation are revealed, you will understand better.”

“Indeed,” said Lan Qiren. “Perhaps these results can be presented, if Nie-zongzhu may be permitted to proceed with the conference as his itinerary dictates.”

Jin Guangshan’s jaw tightened. “With all due respect, Lan-xiansheng, I do not find the Yiling Patriarch’s words here enough to acquit him of his guilt, and I do not wish to continue the conference with such a man in our midst. What of his Stygian Tiger Amulet? Jiang-zongzhu claimed he was destroying it, but I have yet to see any evidence of-”

There was a clattering of metal as Wei Wuxian poured out the broken shards of the amulet onto the floor in front of him, before pulling the final piece – the piece they had used to hold his new core – out of his pocket.

“There you go,” he said lightly. “Inspect it, if you wish. It’s gone. You can even keep the pieces, if that’s what you want. But I’d like to keep this one.” He smiled at the piece in his hand. “For the memories.”

“Clearly then that is the piece that retains the power!” said Jin Guangshan, and Wei Wuxian stood up, crossing the room with amulet in hand. Half the hands in the room flew to their swords, but Wei Wuxian simply held out the empty piece of amulet to Jin Guangshan.

“Please, Jin-zongzhu, inspect it if you wish. You’ll find it no longer possesses any spiritual energy, demonic or otherwise.”

Jin Guangshan scoffed, but he took the amulet, his frown growing darker as he turned it over in his hands. Jinling knew that not even a whiff of resentful energy remained there – Lan Wangji had played cleansing ten times more than he needed to before they used it to hold the remnants of Wei Wuxian’s new core.

“I refuse to believe that this is the Stygian Tiger Amulet,” said Jin Guangshan. “And why do you wish to keep this piece?”

“I made it,” said Wei Wuxian, holding out his hand to ask for the amulet back. “And its face is cute. As for proof it is what it is, I don’t know what to tell you. It’s all here, and it’s destroyed. Lan Zhan was there when it happened.”

“It is the Stygian Tiger Amulet, and its power is gone,” said Hanguang Jun emotionlessly. “Its resentment was largely swallowed by the blood pool in the Burial Mounds.”

“I seem to remember, Jin-zongzhu,” said Wei Wuxian, “that you wanted me to hand in the amulet to Lanling Jin, because it was too much power for one man to possess. Because it was too unstable – because it had injured your cultivators during the Sunshot Campaign. I agree that it is too powerful, and too dangerous. That is why I destroyed it. I hope its destruction may offer the injured cultivators some comfort, along with my apologies for the injuries in the first place. I forged the amulet in desperation in the Burial Mounds, after Wen Chao threw me into them. I kept it out of fear that I would be attacked, overwhelmed, that I would see a repeat of the massacre of Lotus Pier and be helpless to stop it. But I understand the clans’

trepidation. It is gone now. With all that said, I must ask, Jin-zongzhu, what were your intentions in trying to forge an amulet of your own?”

Mutters and whispers ran around the room at Wei Wuxian’s words, and Jin Guangshan glared up at Wei Wuxian.

“I don’t know what you are-”

“I, too, would like to know the answer to that question,” said Nie Mingjue. “We found the plans in Jin Guangyao’s office, many of them in your hand. We have seen the failed prototypes you endorsed. I ask, Jin-zongzhu, if your intention in asking for the surrender of the amulet was to suppress it, why did you then try to make your own?”

“Whatever you found in Guangyao’s office, it has *nothing* to do with me! That *man* tried to murder my son – he clearly worked also to set me up behind my back!”

“Guangyao has expressed regret for sending me to Qiongqi Pass without telling me of Su She’s involvement – he and Zewu Jun were on their way to the valley to prevent the situation from worsening when Su She crossed their tracks,” said Jin Zixuan. “I believe most present have already been briefed on this?”

“Indeed,” said Nie Mingjue. “In any case, the investigation uncovered more evidence than simply files in Jin Guangyao’s office. We also discovered dungeons in Lanling holding fierce corpses as prisoners, along with several others who have been subjected to experiments in demonic cultivation. In these dungeons, there were further blueprints for a new amulet. Furthermore, there was a lock on the door that requires spiritual energy to open – there are traces of spiritual energy there that are quite clearly yours, Jin-zongzhu. So I repeat the question – what were your intentions in forging an amulet of your own?”

Jin Guangshan scowled, and then scoffed again, thrusting the amulet back at Wei Wuxian. “Why wouldn’t I? If the Yiling Patriarch was going to hold on to such power, why would not seek a way to counter it?”

Jinling glanced over the other clan leaders. They all looked troubled, though a couple were nodding along with Jin Guangshan. Yao-zongzhu was one of them, his head bobbing up and down imperiously, Jinling felt a swell of disgust rise within him.

“It is your right to protect your people how you see fit,” said Nie Mingjue coldly. “However, that does *not* give you the right to torture and kill innocent people to further your means. But I am getting ahead of myself. Before we get into the investigation, I believe you wished to make an accusation of impersonation, Jin Zixun?”

Jinling took a deep breath, and Zizhen bumped his arm against him. It was okay. They’d planned for this. His father had his back. It was okay.

“Yes,” said Jin Zixun, a hateful look in his eye as he glared at Jinling and jerked up his chin. “That boy who sits with Yunmeng Jiang impersonated a member of our sect at Qiongqi Pass. He even bore the vermilion mark on his forehead – to Lanling Jin that is the *highest* disrespect.”

“Very well,” said Nie Mingjue, in a tone that implied he thought this a great waste of time. “Yu-gongzi, how do you address these charges?”

Jinling stood and bowed, first to Nie Mingjue, and then as shallowly as he could get away with to the Jin. “I’m sorry if you took me to be impersonating a member of your clan, but I’m a little confused. I was wearing yellow, not gold. We were on our way back from a night hunt that went... uh, a little wrong...” Jinling bit his lip and rubbed the back of his neck, giving the sheepish smile that his mother and Wei Wuxian had spent ten minutes teaching him the other day for this very purpose. “We made quite a mess, and halfway through the hunt my own robes got ruined completely. The merchant we helped out had some yellow ones for me to wear. I have them here.”

He reached into his sleeve and pulled out the yellow robes they’d bought in Lotus Pier (and then covered with blood, and then washed so clear stains would remain) holding them up to the room. Jin Zixun’s face grew pale.

“That’s not what you were wearing.”

Jinling pulled his face into a look of confusion, glancing between Zizhen, his father, and Jin Zixun. “Uh, it was...?”

“Were you really focused on the finer aspects of his outfit, Jin-gongzi, with everything that was going on?” said Wei Wuxian lazily.

“He bore the vermillion mark!” Zixun spat, and Jinling widened his eyes, shaking his head slightly.

“No, I didn’t!” he lied worriedly. “Jin-gongzi, I’m sorry for the confusion – that was blood.”

“All three of the boys were covered in blood,” said Wei Wuxian, shaking his head. “You are clutching at straws, Jin Zixun.”

“That’s bullshit!” snarled Jin Zixun. “He was wearing the mark!”

“I wasn’t,” said Jinling, shaking his head, and Jin Zixun rose to his feet, reaching for his sword –

And Jiang Cheng, Wei Wuxian, and Jin Zixuan stood up, their hands moving to their own weapons, and Nie Mingjue held up his hand.

“That is enough!” he said, looking at Jin Zixuan. “Jin-gongzi, you were there that day. In your opinion, were those the robes he was wearing? Was he wearing the mark, or just covered in blood?”

“I wasn’t paying much attention to the exact outfit,” said Jin Zixuan, “but he was not impersonating my sect, and it was quite clearly blood on his face.”

Jin Zixun gave a cold laugh. “And we should trust your word, Zixuan? The word of a man who has turned his back on his own clan?”

“Hey, if you still think he’s possessed Jiang Cheng could hit him with the Zidian,” Wei Wuxian offered far too cheerfully, earning him an eye roll from Jin Zixuan and a sigh from Jiang Cheng.

“I have not turned my back on my clan,” said Jin Zixuan. “But knowing what has been done by Lanling Jin, I cannot in good conscience sit with you.”

“We are getting off track,” said Nie Mingjue. “Lan Haoran – you were also there. Had you ever met Yu-gongzi before?”

“No, Nie-zongzhu, I had not,” said Jingyi’s father.

“And to you, did it look like he was wearing a vermillion mark, or did it look like blood?”

“I can understand why Jin-gongzi was confused, it did look a little like a vermillion mark,” said Lan Haoran, inclining his head. “But I am rather sure it was blood.”

“Is there anyone else who would contest that?” said Nie Mingjue, looking around the room. Jinling’s heart picked up speed in his chest – he knew it was unlikely that anyone could, with his father backing up his story. Everyone else had been too far away. “Good. Now, with that out of the way, if everyone could sit down, and if I can do so without further interruptions, I would like to share with the conference the results of the investigation.”

Jin Guangshan’s jaw clenched, and it looked very much like he wanted to object, but he held his tongue as Jiang Cheng, Wei Wuxian, and Jin Zixuan sat down. Reluctantly, Jin Zixun sat too.

And Nie Mingjue began.

And soon, Jinling felt sick. He had *known* that the investigation wasn’t going to reveal anything good. He had known a lot of the details of how bad things had been. But he hadn’t known everything, hadn’t realised the extent of the horrors of the camps at Qiongqi Pass, and the dungeons of Jinlintai that *still* held prisoners for the Jin to experiment on.

He wanted to run, to block his ears with his hands and squeeze his eyes shut and hide his face until it was over. He didn’t want to hear about the torture and the experiments and the cruelty, he didn’t want to hear about the women who were raped and the children who were killed, he didn’t want to think of little A-Yuan being anywhere near the things being described.

He had never known that once, Sizhui had had a sister.

He’d never known that his once-clan killed her, in the course of experimenting with resentful energy and demonic cultivation.

He wondered if Sizhui knew.

From the sickly pale of Zizhen’s face at his side, he didn’t think Zizhen had any idea of it. He shifted slightly closer to his friend, and Zizhen leant against him a little.

And Nie Mingjue *kept talking*. Now and then, he would call Wen Qing or Wen Ning to offer their perspectives or testimony, the former speaking with a quiet certainty while the latter stumbled over his words, but relayed them, nevertheless. At other times, Nie Mingjue would call people who had been a part of the investigation – Jinling’s least favourite of those was when a member of the Lan clan described playing inquiry in the now desolate plains of Qiongqi Pass, and communicating with the aching soul of a seven-year-old.

Sometimes, Nie Mingjue called Meng Yao to talk. That was even harder to listen to. He was kept in the corner of the room most of the time, standing between two guards out of Jinling’s sight. When Nie Mingjue asked him to speak, he stepped forward and spoke quietly, but clearly, corroborating the evidence provided by the investigation. Watching him speak made Jinling’s stomach crawl, and his fingers tighten around the hilt of his borrowed sword. What was more, everyone was addressing him as Jin Guangyao again, a name that now made Jinling want to scream.

To make matters worse, the only thing he had to distract himself from the uncomfortable emotions he felt towards his once Xiao-shushu was the awful things he was saying.

Lanling Jin had tortured civilians.

Lanling Jin had lied to the other clans.

Lanling Jin had used demonic cultivation on innocence people.

Lanling Jin had no leg to stand on.

Of course, that didn’t stop them trying.

“These people that you claim to be victims,” said Jin Guangshan, when Nie Mingjue had finished speaking. “They were *all* of Qishan Wen. As far as I know, you have no right to dictate what I do with my conquered enemies.”

Wei Wuxian laughed, but Jiang Cheng gave him a sharp look that stopped him from speaking. Still, even without words the meaning fell loud and clear throughout the room, and Jin Guangshan’s lip curled in anger.

Who, exactly, had Jin Guangshan conquered?

“Qishan Wen massacred so many innocent people,” said Ouyang-zongzhu, and Zizhen stiffened. Subtly as he could, Jinling reached out and squeezed Zizhen’s hand. “I do not see why this is not just an eye for an eye.”

“Tell me then, Ouyang-zongzhu,” said Jiang Cheng, in a quiet, dangerous voice that Jinling had very, very rarely heard, “if the conference today deems that you should be punished for the unfair execution of civilian prisoners, should your clan be punished beside you? Should your children pay for your crimes?”

Ouyang-zongzhu turned pale as death, and Zizhen gripped Jinling’s hand so tight his nails broke through the skin, but Jinling didn’t flinch.

“It is different,” Ouyang-zongzhu said, through gritted teeth.

“Why?” demanded Jiang Cheng. “What makes your children different from any of those killed by the Jin?”

Ouyang-zongzhu said nothing, meeting Jiang Cheng’s glare for a solid thirty seconds before he lost his nerve, looking down and away with pursed lips.

“An argument could be made that the adult civilians contributed to the war effort, even if they did not fight it themselves, but the same cannot be said of the children,” said Nie Mingjue gravely.

“I agree,” said Jiang Cheng coldly.

“As do I,” said Lan Xichen. “I would go so far as to argue against the guilt of the adult civilians, too. They had no power over Wen Ruohan, or his actions.”

“Assuming that they indeed all civilians, and not soldiers masquerading as such, I agree too,” said He-zongzhu.

“Those who have survived are,” said Wei Wuxian. “Those we’ve found, anyway. I can vouch for everyone from the Burial Mounds.”

“Then I agree, too,” said the leader of one of the smaller clans.

“As do I,” said Qin Cangye, who Jinling noticed for the first time with a slight, bittersweet surprise. Qin Su’s father had visited Jinlintai a fair bit throughout Jinling’s life. Jinling liked him.

Further murmurs of agreement ran over the room, though notably not from Ouyang-zongzhu. He would’ve thought that anyone could see the tides were turning, that it was an increasingly bad idea to side with Lanling Jin...

“Is there anything else you have to say in your defence?” Nie Mingjue said to Jin Guangshan, who rose to his feet.

“Yes! This, clearly, is a conspiracy to weaken Lanling Jin! None of you cared what was happening to the Wen two months ago! You only care because Nie Mingjue, Lan Xichen, and Jiang Cheng tell you that you should, because you do not wish to make an enemy of the major clans! Clearly, they wish to replace me with my weak-hearted son! They want a Jin sect that is easy to control, because they don’t like the power I hold. If you agree with this, esteemed sect leaders, you are agreeing to a coup! Look at these ‘witnesses’ they claim to have! The treacherous son of a whore, a child who ‘accidentally’ impersonated a member of our clan, two of Wen Ruohan’s *inner circle*, the *Yiling Patriarch*, and his cousin! How could any of them claim to hold a shred of integrity?”

“Well,” said Lan Xichen, his voice impressively pleasant, “it has been established that Yu-gongzi’s ‘impersonation’ was nothing more than confusion on Jin-gongzi’s part, that both Wen Qing and Wen Ning risked their lives to aid Yunmeng Jiang in the war, and that Wei



Wuxian bears far less guilt than most believed. If all you can do is continue to spread the same lies you did before, Jin-zongzhu, I fear your defence is weaker than you think. Moreover, it is not entirely relevant, but as you have decided to call them men of low integrity, I would tell the conference that it was, in fact, Wei Zizhen and Yu Jinling that killed Xue Yang.” A murmur ran around the room and Jinling blinked in surprise. Beside him, Zizhen started to go red. “They were among the party Jiang-zongzhu brought to our aid, once A-Yao and I were able to send word to him when we took down Su She. Xue Yang escaped in the fray, and the two young disciples of Yunmeng Jiang were able to face both him and the fifteen fierce corpses that he summoned to fight them. I must say, they are most impressive, and undoubtedly an asset to any clan. You have my congratulations, Jiang-zongzhu.”

“Thank you, Zewu Jun,” said Jiang Cheng, bowing slightly at Lan Xichen, and Jinling couldn’t help but smile at the pride in his uncle’s voice. “We are proud of them.”

“I have also borne witness,” said Lan Wangji suddenly, speaking for the first time. “As have Shufu and Xiongzhang. I must ask, Jin-zongzhu, if our integrity is in question?”

“Clearly!” said Jin-zongzhu, and then he huffed, flicking his sleeve. “I refuse to listen to any more of this nonsense. I am leaving.”

He took a step towards the door, which was instantly blocked by a row of Nie disciples.

“Earlier, Jin-zongzhu, you said that this was not a trial. It was not, but I believe maybe now it should be,” said Nie Mingjue, raising his eyebrows. “Does anyone contest?”

There was a deafening silence around.

Nie Mingjue smiled.

“Well, Jin-zongzhu,” he said. “I don’t think you’re going anywhere.”

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading, I hope you enjoyed this chapter! Please do let me know what you thought of it if you're in the mood to, I love hearing from you! Until next time, please take care!

# Chapter 54

## Chapter Notes

Hi there! Thank you all so much for the lovely comments on the last chapter, and for being so patient in the wait for this one, I hope you enjoy it!

As a note - the legal systems in ancient and medieval China were very complex and nuanced, and very different from the Western ideas of justice that I am more familiar with. I have done research for this chapter but I'm sure I barely scratched the surface, so what I've written may not be historically accurate in places. If there's anything that is egregiously offensive in any way please let me know so I can change it!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Wei Wuxian watched in delight as Jin Guangshan went pale, horror and fury and disbelief racing across his face in quick succession. For a long moment, the man seemed lost for words as he gaped at Nie Mingjue, but then the slack shock on his face twisted into a glare.

“You – you dare?” he spat. “Who are you to put me on trial? What makes you think you have the right to prosecute me?”

“No man is untouchable, Jin-zongzhu. Even as Chief Cultivator, Wen Ruohan was held accountable for his actions, as you will be,” said Lan Xichen mildly, and Jin Guangshan turned his furious eyes to him.

“How dare you, Lan Xichen? Who do you think you are? I was head of Lanling Jin before you were even born! You are a child, sitting in a seat too big for him, trying to claw his way into a position of power he could never deserve! You-”

Jin Guangshan’s lips sealed shut, the fury in his gaze blazing even brighter, and Wei Wuxian glanced over his shoulder. Lan Zhan was glaring at Jin Guangshan with ice in his eyes, and his hand tight around Bichen’s hilt. The anger on his face was so raw it hurt to see. If Wei Wuxian had never even heard of Jin Guangshan before, that look would be enough to make him want to punch a hole through the man’s head, but violence – or even threatening violence – wouldn’t be helpful right now. No doubt part of Jin Guangshan’s intention was to provoke an emotional reaction, and cast doubt on their judgement.

So Wei Wuxian went with his second instinct, one he knew would grind against Jin Guangshan even more than a threat would. He threw back his head, and laughed.

He made no effort to rein himself in, letting the sound ring loud and clear around the hall and winding his arm around his stomach when the laughter stole his breath. When he could feel every eye in the hall on him, and feel tears in the corner of his own, Wei Wuxian shook his head.

“Ah, Jin-zongzhu,” he chuckled, and then he sighed, smirking. “Zewu Jun could defeat you in any form of combat or competition under the sun – no doubt he could’ve done so when he *was* a child, too. You look at a man who could best you in combat while sleep-walking, who has mastered areas of cultivation you haven’t even *tried*, and is going to *preside over your trial*, and you think it’s a good idea to try and belittle him?” He laughed again. “Jin-zongzhu, for all your many, many years of experience, one would think you’re smarter than that by now.”

Jin Guangshan’s glare fixed on Wei Wuxian, and behind him Jin Zixun lurched to his feet.

“How dare you?” he yelled, drawing his sword (a new one, Wei Wuxian remembered gleefully, because Zixuan had completely destroyed Zixun’s sword in the Burial Mounds) and pointing it at Wei Wuxian.

Personally, Wei Wuxian didn’t consider Jin Zixun much of a threat, so he didn’t bother moving, but it wouldn’t have mattered if he was wrong. Before he could blink, Jiang Cheng was on his feet and in front of him, Zidian sparking furiously to life on his wrist, and he heard Jinling and Zizhen leap up behind him. In the same instant, Lan Zhan appeared at his side, and even Zixuan rose, hand on the hilt of his sword.

“Enough!” roared Nie Mingjue, Baxia rattling threateningly in her stand as he rose. “Jin Zixun, sheath your weapon now or we will remove it from you by force! To behave so poorly in a conference, in a trial – it’s a disgrace!”

As Nie Mingjue spoke, Wei Wuxian glanced over his shoulder to smile at the boys behind him. “It’s okay,” he said quietly. “Jin Zixun isn’t a threat, and Chifeng Zun has it handled, anyway. You can sit down, it’s okay.”

Zizhen met his eye for a moment, and then nodded, bowing his head to Nie Mingjue before sitting back down, dragging a reluctant Jinling down with him. The sheer venom of the glare Jinling was sending Zixun was truly astonishing, and made him look so much more like Jiang Cheng. Wei Wuxian smiled.

As he did, however, he let his eyes shift over to Wen Qing and Wen Ning. If Wen Ning got up, even with all the testimony they’d given, some of the clan leaders still might see him as no more than a weapon. Wen Qing was clearly thinking along the same lines – her hand was tight around Wen Ning’s wrist, and though he looked wide-eyed and worried he had made no attempt to move.

Wei Wuxian smiled at them, and Wen Qing nodded sharply, but then her eyes flickered pointedly back to the still standing Jin Guangshan, and Wei Wuxian supposed he probably should pay attention, too.

“Sit down, now,” Nie Mingjue was saying, almost growling, “or I will have someone make you.” Then he paused, turning to Lan Zhan, and Jiang Cheng, and the Peacock. “Jiang-zongzhu, Wangji, Jin-gongzi, please return to your seats.”

Jiang Cheng and the Peacock both sat down, but Lan Zhan hesitated at Wei Wuxian’s side, his eyes fixed on Jin Zixun. At some point, the other man had sheathed his sword, but he was

still glaring at Wei Wuxian. With a small smile, Wei Wuxian reached up and tapped the back of Lan Zhan's hand. He would have squeezed it, but outside of their family their engagement wasn't *technically* public yet, so he didn't know how Lan Zhan would feel about it. Lan Zhan glanced down at him, and then reluctantly stepped back, sitting down once more.

Jin Guangshan's lips split open, blood spewing out from his mouth and down his chin as he broke the silencing spell. "You have no authority over me," he spat. "This means war – do you understand that, Nie Mingjue? You will not oust me that easily – even should you kill me here, and now, Lanling Jin will rise and take its vengeance! My men outnumber yours, all of them, and we will–"

"Take on the entire world?" scoffed Wei Wuxian. He would've let the man continue running his mouth a little, but out of the corner of his eye he could see Lan Zhan's lips pursed white with rage, and at the mention of the word 'war' he'd heard Zizhen's breath hitch behind him. He had no intention of letting Jin Guangshan upset anyone he loved again. "How well did that work out for Wen Ruohan? He outnumbered us too. He underestimated us, too. Of course, you might not remember, Jin-zongzhu, having failed to show up to a single battle."

"Jin-zongzhu, please," said Jin Zixuan, a heavy weariness in his voice that made Wei Wuxian actually feel a little sorry for him. "This is already a spectacle. For the sake of the dignity of Lanling Jin, please sit down."

"For the sake of the dignity of Lanling Jin?" repeated Jin Guangshan, his voice trembling with rage. "What right do you have to speak on the dignity of Lanling Jin? You are sitting with the *Jiang*!" His gaze fell on Jiang Cheng, and his eyes narrowed. He gave a bitter laugh. "If Jiang Fengmian could see how far his clan has–"

"That is *enough*!" Nie Mingjue growled, raising his hand. Two Nie disciples stepped towards Jin Guangshan, moving as one would approach a wild beast. "If you do not sit down and be quiet, Jin Guangshan, we will make you."

Trembling with rage, Jin Guangshan took a step back, and slowly sat behind his table. Behind him, Jin Zixun sat, too, his face bright red and furious.

And the trial began.

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Technically speaking, the trial ended swiftly, but to Lan Wangji the three days it spanned seemed to last a lifetime. Though the evidence had already been presented and verified, there were ten men accused in total, each with a varying degree of severity to their charges. It took time to examine each of them, and for the most part, Wangji found their attempts at justifying or belittling their actions pathetic and vexing.

It might have been more tolerable if he had been sleeping better, but for the first time in a month he was sleeping alone, and he hated it. Of course, he and Wei Ying were engaged, not married, and it would have been very improper for Nie Mingjue to give them a room together, but now when his nightmares woke him, Wei Ying was not there beside him to lull Wangji back to sleep simply by breathing. Wei Ying was not there to sprawl across his chest, or tangle his legs with Wangji's, or murmur his name reverently in his sleep.

Furthermore, he couldn't ask Wei Ying to join him, because even before they arrived in Qinghe Wei Ying had confessed that he was afraid of someone trying to attack Wen Qing or Wen Ning as the representatives of the Wen Clan, so Wei Ying was sharing a room with Wen Ning, one that connected to Wen Qing's. Asking him to leave simply because Lan Wangji was lonely was not going to happen.

It was only three days, but it felt like an eternity before they finally arrived at the final sentencing of the accused. Almost half were of Lanling Jin – Jin Guangshan, Jin Guangyao and Jin Zixun were all among the accused, as was a man Wangji had never heard of – the overseer of the camp at Qiongqi Pass, Jin Guangli. He was, apparently, a cousin of Jin Guangshan, and one of the few guards whose personal malice could be proved.

If it were up to Wangji, every guard in the camp would be on trial, but Xiongzhong had pointed out that it would be almost impossible to prove which guards had acted cruel and maliciously, and which ones had simply followed the orders of their clan leader. The only way to identify the guilty men would be by bringing them before the surviving Wen, which would no doubt be incredibly traumatising for them. Furthermore, after so much time it was highly possible that the Wen would not be able to correctly identify their abusers. Even Wen Qing said that the best they could do was prosecute the ringleaders, and those they knew without doubt were guilty. So, Wangji accepted it.

Besides the Jin on trial, there were also six leaders of minor clans who had bought labour from the camps. To Wangji's slight disgruntlement, three had been all but pardoned, because the men they had bought were still alive. The men were still enslaved, and still being used for free labour, but apparently the investigation had deemed their treatment 'acceptable' – something that seemed to mean they were not being beaten or tortured on a daily basis. Those three clans were ordered to release the prisoners to the care of Yunmeng Jiang, and provide each prisoner an amount of compensation.

To Wangji, it seemed nothing more than a slap on the wrist. These clan leaders had been to the camps to buy their labour, they had seen the conditions. They had been *assured* that the men they bought were not soldiers, that the soldiers among the Wen had been executed, so they should have known better. But it was not his decision to make, and if Wei Ying was not protesting, Wangji could let it lie.

Then, there was Zhao-zongzhu of the Zhoushan Zhao clan, who had deeply abused the prisoners he had taken. Less than half were still alive, and after hearing testimony and seeing the evidence provided by the investigation, the man was stripped of his title, and sentenced to two decades of hard labour. It still seemed mild to Wangji.

Things were a little more complicated with Yao-zongzhu and Ouyang-zongzhu – both had executed the prisoners they'd bought as soon as their labour was complete. They were also, to Wangji's disgust, adamant they had done nothing wrong. That the Wen clan deserved what they got, that they had simply reaped what they had sown.

"As far as we were aware they were criminals who helped the war effort!" Yao-zongzhu declared, as Ouyang-zongzhu nodded alongside him. "As such we had every right to execute them for what they did to our clans, to our people!"

To Wangji's disgust, they were not entirely wrong in the letter of the law. *Had* the Wen been war criminals, they would have been utterly within their rights, and there was historical precedent for civilians who supported the war effort being punished along with the soldiers.

Moreover, unlike the Jin they had not actively hid their actions from the other clans, and they had not broken any promises. They had not practised demonic cultivation on innocent people. To many of the other clans, those were the worst of the crimes. The lives they'd taken, the torture they'd watched – apparently, that meant less than lies told.

They claimed they had done nothing wrong.

It made Wangji's blood boil.

“Before we discuss the punishment, I would ask if anyone will speak for Ouyang-zongzhu or Yao-zongzhu?” asked Nie Mingjue at the end of the discussion, and Wangji saw Wei Ying and Jiang Wanyin glare at Ouyang-zongzhu. Behind them, Zizhen's head was bowed, his hands tight around Suibian, and Jinling's hand on his wrist.

Lan Wangji felt cool satisfaction rise within him as Ouyang-zongzhu's jaw tightened. Had he acted differently with Zizhen, he would have had far more allies here.

In the end, it was agreed that both clans would pay compensation to the remnants of the Wen, money that would go directly into the building of the new village outside of Lotus Pier. The sums were higher than Wangji had expected, given the number of clan leaders who seemed to agree that Yao-zongzhu and Ouyang-zongzhu shouldn't be punished at all, but it still seemed so small a price to pay.

Then, Jiang Cheng spoke. “Yunmeng Jiang respects the decision of the conference. However, from this moment we will have no further trade dealings with Pingyang Yao or Baling Ouyang notice. Should I see Yao-zongzhu or Ouyang-zongzhu make a concerted effort to atone for their actions, I may reconsider, but until then I cannot in good conscience trade with either clan. Nor, for that matter, with Zhoushan Zhao.”

“The same can be said of Gusu Lan,” said Xiongzhang firmly, and Wangji felt himself exhale.

“And Qinghe Nie,” said Nie Mingjue, watching with cold eyes as Yao-zongzhu went pale, and Ouyang-zongzhu's hands began to tremble.

If they were careful, and fortunate, this would not cripple Baling Ouyang and Pingyang Yao, but it would be close. If they were careless, or unlucky, their clans would fall.

In Lan Wangji's mind, this was far closer to justice.

Then, finally, they came to the Jin.

As Wangji expected, Jin Guangyao received a fair amount of leniency on account of his smuggling the children out of the camps, and his efforts to atone for his actions since. He would be imprisoned in a residence for the foreseeable future, and that would be the end of it.

But Jin Zixun and Jin Guangli, the overseer of the camp, had both committed acts of depravity with their own hands. They had both assaulted the women in the camps, had both murdered innocent people – innocent *children* – with no sign of regret or remorse. They had both been *proved* to have done so.

“With this in mind,” Nie Mingjue said, staring directly at Jin Guangshan, “in the case of Jin Zixun and Jin Guangli, Qinghe Nie recommends a sentence of death.”

Jin Guangli’s lip curled in disgust, but he had the sense to look away from Chifeng Zun as he did. Jin Zixun, on the other hand, squawked like an injured bird, the colour draining from his face.

“Shufu!”

But Jin Guangshan said nothing. His jaw and fists were clenched, but his eyes were trained on the floor.

“Does anyone object?” said Nie Mingjue, and Jin Zixun looked frantically around the hall.

A couple of people turned their heads away. Most met his gaze.

No one said a word.

“Zixuan!” Zixun cried, the name strangled as it left his lips, and Lan Wangji glanced at Jin Zixun out of the corner of his eye. The man was stone still, and a little pale, and grief hung heavy in his eyes, but there was nothing but resolution on his face. “Tangdi – speak for me! Please!”

“I cannot,” said Jin Zixun quietly.

Jin Zixun choked, shaking his head like a madman, and for the first time during the trial, Lan Wangji felt a surge of grim satisfaction.

In a split second, Jin Zixun sprang to his feet, lurching towards his cousin with his sword raised and a strangled scream in his throat. A dozen people lunged for him, but for all his faults Jin Zixun was not slow, and the world seemed to move in slow motion as Zixun flung Suihua up to block the blow, as Jinling screamed, as Wangji flew to his feet –

*Thunk!*

Jin Zixun froze two steps before his cousin, sword still held above his head, eyes bulging wide. His mouth opened, blood spilling down his chin as he sucked in a rattling breath, and looked slowly down. Dead in the centre of his chest was the hilt of a sword, its blade driven straight through him. Choking, Jin Zixun looked up slowly, following the line of the sword –

To Wei Ying’s outstretched hand.

Fury twisted his features, and Jin Zixun lurched for Wei Ying, but even before Wangji could move Zidian wrapped around Jin Zixun’s neck, and the man shrieked, dropping his sword and grabbing at the whip as the smell of burning flesh hit Wangji’s nose. Jiang Wanyin

wrenched his arm back, and Jin Zixun hit the floor, his hate-filled eyes glaring at Wei Ying until they lost focus, and went dull.

Until he stopped breathing.

“Peacock, are you okay?” asked Wei Ying, his voice trembling with anger, and Jin Zixuan gave a short nod.

“Well, I suppose that saves us discussing the manner of his execution,” muttered Nie Mingjue, and Jiang Wanyin snorted, recalling Zidian and then holding out his hand for the sword in Zixun’s chest.

Of course, Wangji realised, it was Sandu. Wen Qing had not yet cleared Wei Ying to cultivate properly, and he didn’t want to draw attention by suddenly carrying his sword again, so Zizhen was the one who currently held Suibian.

Automatically, Lan Wangji glanced over his shoulder at Zizhen and Jinling. The younger boy was trembling, his face stark pale and his eyes fixed on the back of his father’s head, and Zizhen was gripping his arm tightly, and murmuring something close to his ear.

Nie Mingjue waved his hand, and a couple of Nie disciples swept forward, dragging Jin Zixun’s body away.

“Perhaps we should take a break,” Xiongzhang suggested, his eyes flickering towards Jin Zixuan and Jinling, but Jin Guangshan scoffed.

“I fail to see the point in that,” he sneered, and Wangji clenched his jaw, “unless you are too afraid to sentence me, Zewu Jun?”

“It is not a matter of fear, Jin-zongzhu,” said Xichen, and Jin Guangshan scoffed, turning his attention to his son.

“So, what will it be, Zixuan?” he said. “Do you think if you have me killed, Lanling Jin will blindly follow you in my place? Do you think you could ever have their loyalty after this? After everything I have done for you, everything I have given you, you stand here now against me and call for my death!”

“I do not call for your death, Jin-zongzhu,” said Jin Zixuan quietly. “Despite your crimes, you are my father. I will not push for your death, I will not speak in favour of it. But I will not speak for you, now, either. I cannot.”

Jin Guangshan laughed coldly. “Pathetic...” He turned his eyes to Nie Mingjue. “So, what trumped up charges are you going to execute me for, Nie-zongzhu? Who is it I killed? Who is it I brutalised?”

“You sanctioned every crime this trial has discussed,” said Nie Mingjue. “You lined your pockets with the blood of innocent people – with the blood of *children* – in an attempt to grow your own power and influence. You did so despite assuring the other clans the Wen civilians would be monitored, but not massacred. You tried to create a weapon of demonic



cultivation – you say to counter Wei Wuxian, I suspect to further your own power, but either way you sought to create this weapon by experimenting with demonic cultivation on *children*. You hired Xue Yang to work on this for you – Xue Yang, who is *known* to have massacred the Yueyang Chang clan, and who is *known* to have worked for Wen Ruohan. When even Xue Yang could not create the weapon you wanted, you dishonourably arranged an ambush on a man you had *invited* to Lanling in order to have grounds to steal his own spiritual weapon.”

Wangji felt his hands trembling.

“Are there any here who do not feel that execution is too high a price to pay for those crimes?”

Silence.

Jin Guangshan cast his eyes over the gathered clan leaders, but few met his gaze. Ouyang-zongzhu and Yao-zongzhu, suitably cowed by their own sentences, turned their faces away entirely. Qin Cangye did meet Jin Guangshan’s eye, with a look of regret and grief on his face, but he said nothing.

*Of course, he doesn’t know what Jin Guangshan did to his wife*, Lan Wangji thought darkly.

“Very well,” said Nie Mingjue, a glint of satisfaction in his eye as he stared at Jin Guangshan. “This conference hereby sentences Jin Guangshan to death.”

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! I hope you enjoyed this chapter, please do let me know what you thought if you have time and fancy doing so :)

Just as a heads' up, I'm about to return to full time work for the first time since December (thanks to the pandemic) so chapters may be a little slower. I will do my best to update every three days but self-care is important too :) Until next time, please take care!

# Chapter 55

## Chapter Notes

Hi there! Thank you all so much for your lovely comments, support, and your patience! I truly appreciate it, and I hope you find this chapter worth the wait!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

As he closed the door to his guest room in Qinghe between the trial and dinner, Jin Zixuan felt sick.

It wasn't that he had expected a sentence other than death, or that it was a sentence Jin Guangshan didn't deserve – Zixuan knew that he did. But his stomach still churned, and his heartbeat still felt too faint as it thrummed, lightning quick, through his veins.

Tomorrow, Jin Guangshan would be dead.

And when all was said and done, Jin Guangshan was still his father. It didn't matter that he'd always been distant, that he had preened over Zixuan's achievements as if they were his own but never shown a single slack of interest in what Zixuan liked, or wanted, or hoped for. He had always treated Zixuan more like a prop than a human being, and even as he poured luxury after luxury into Zixuan's lap, he had never expressed a modicum of affection or care. Jin Zixuan had been cared for far better than any of his siblings, but he truly could not say whether or not his father had ever loved him.

But he had loved his father. A part of him still did. He did not *like* his father, and he detested the abhorrent things he had done – he believed, deeply, that Jin Guangshan was a terrible man. But like and love were not the same, and they did not always align. He hated his father, and his father's deeds, but even that couldn't stop the small, aching part of his heart that longed for the man he had once believed his father to be – a man who was strong and talented and a good leader, a man who cared about more than just the money in his pocket and the women in his bed.

Jin Zixuan knew that if that man had ever existed, he was long dead.

It did not seem fair that Zixuan still mourned him.

There was an almost frantic knocking on the door, and he sighed, walking over to it and opening it. At once, his heart twisted. It was – perhaps unsurprisingly – Jinling, and his face was pale as marble.

“Can I-”

Even before his son finished speaking, Zixuan stepped back to let him inside, and the moment Zixuan had closed the door behind him, A-Ling flung himself against Zixuan's chest, stifling a sob in his shoulder.

"A-Ling!" A little surprised, Zixuan held him close, rubbing Jinling's back gently. "What's wrong? Are you hurt?"

"A-Die," Jinling protested, squeezing him tighter and shuddering. "A-Die, he, he tried to – I thought he was going to – I – you – A-Die, *A-Die!*"

Oh.

"It's okay, A-Ling," he murmured gently, pressing a kiss to his son's hair. "It's okay, I'm not hurt. I'm okay. I'm okay. We're all okay."

Jinling shuddered again, pressing his face deeper into Zixuan's shoulder. "I can't," he whispered, his voice rasping and raw and aching. "I can't, A-Die, I can't lose you again, not now, I can't, I can't!"

"Shh, now," Jin Zixuan said softly, rocking Jinling in his arms slightly. "I'm here, A-Ling. I'm here. Breathe now, little one. Just breathe." Shakily, Jinling did as he was told, and Zixuan ran a hand over his hair. "That's it. That's it. I'm here. I love you."

"I love you, too," Jinling mumbled, his words a little mangled, and Zixuan shut his eyes, hugging Jinling tighter.

This. This was what mattered.

Eventually, A-Ling's breathing calmed, and slowed, and he pulled away slightly, rubbing his arm across his eyes. "A-Die... are you okay? After... after what happened?" There was so much worry in his eyes that Zixuan's heart hurt a little, and he sighed, pulling A-Ling back close to his chest and resting his chin on his son's head.

"Not entirely," he admitted. "But I'll be fine." He paused, and then sighed again, hugging Jinling tighter. "Are you?"

Jinling gave an odd mix of a shrug and a nod. "I never really knew either of them. But..."

Jin Zixuan nodded, forcing himself to pull back so that he could meet Jinling's eye. "A-Ling, I need to talk to you about something..."

Jinling swallowed, nervousness poorly hidden in his eyes as he nodded. "Okay?"

Zixuan opened his mouth, and then closed it again. He sighed, and put a hand on Jinling's shoulder, squeezing it gently. "Do you remember back in the Burial Mounds, when we spoke about which clan you would choose to live in, where you'd prefer to be? Have you thought anymore about it?"

Jinling winced, and then quickly looked down at his toes. It looked like his lip was trembling. "I don't know," he whispered.

“What is it you don’t know?” pressed Zixuan gently, and Jinling swallowed again. “A-Ling, whatever it is you want, you can tell me. I won’t be angry.”

“I know,” Jinling said quietly, miserably. “I want... I want to stay with you and A-Niang. I really, really do. But... but Lanling Jin...”

“I understand,” Zixuan murmured, pulling A-Ling back into his arms and tucking him under his chin again. “And I know that Jiang Cheng must still feel like as much of a parent to you as we do. I know you feel safer there. I know why.”

“I don’t want to be apart from you and A-Niang,” Jinling said, his voice tight. “I only just – A-Die...”

“I know,” Zixuan said, and then he sighed. “In either case, for the next few months, I... I’m going to need you to stay at Lotus Pier with your mother and Rulan. I need to go back to Lanling. For all his lies and boasting, Jin Guangshan is right that there will be those among Lanling Jin who will not want to follow me, after this. I said nearly two months ago that I would not bring A-Li or Rulan back to Jinlintai until it is safe to do so, and I meant it. It will be dangerous, at first, and your mother and the baby... I need them to be somewhere safe. And I need *you* to be somewhere safe too.”

“No,” said Jinling bluntly, fearfully, and his hands gripped Zixuan’s arms like vices. “No, A-Die if it’s that dangerous, I – let me come with you! Don’t, don’t go on your own, don’t-”

“I will not be alone,” Zixuan said, more calmly than he felt, and he smiled sadly. “I don’t want to go back. If it were a matter of what I wanted, I would cede from the sect altogether and live at Lotus Pier. Assuming Jiang Cheng would take me. But if I do, who will set Lanling Jin to a better course? Who will stop this from happening again with a different man? Who will get rid of the rot in the heart of our sect? Someone has to, A-Ling. And it has to be me.”

“Then let me come with you!” Jinling demanded again, his grip tightening. “No one, no one knows who I am, they won’t know to target me! If it’s dangerous, A-Die, you can’t go alone, you can’t! Please!”

“No,” said Zixuan firmly. “I need you to be somewhere safe, so-”

“Who’s going to keep you safe?” Jinling demanded, his voice rising. “Jin Zixun tried to take your head off, he –”

“A-Ling,” said Zixuan firmly, and Jinling stopped talking, his mouth shutting abruptly. “I will be careful, but if you are in Lanling I will worry, and that will be a distraction. If I’m distracted, I may get hurt. I can defend myself, but your mother cannot. I need you to take care of her.”

“But A-Niang will have Jiujiu and Xian-jiujiu – no one could get near her!” protested Jinling, and Zixuan took his shoulders, sharpening his voice.

“Jinling, listen to me. I said I need you to stay at Lotus Pier. I am your father, and I expect you to trust me, and listen to me. Do you understand?”

Jinling opened his mouth furiously, but then he faltered, and closed it again, turning his face away. He was trembling, and there were tears clinging to his eyelashes, and Zixuan had to fight not to hug him again.

“A-Ling, do you understand me?”

Jinling closed his eyes, his head hanging low. “I understand, A-Die,” he whispered brokenly, “but I don’t want to lose you again.”

Zixuan’s resolve broke, and he wrapped his arms around his son yet again. “I very much hope you won’t have to. There are people in Lanling I trust more than others.” *And others outside*, he thought, resolving to send a messenger butterfly very shortly. “Muqin is still there. And I will be careful, Jinling, I promise. I will be fine. And I will visit Lotus Pier as often as I can, at least weekly – it’s not too far by sword. When it is safe, you may join me there, if you like.” He paused, considering. “According to the world, you are A-Li’s cousin. If you bonded in Lotus Pier after the untimely death of your parents, it would make sense that you might accompany her back to Jinlintai. While you’re still a child it will be easier, but we can figure it out, A-Ling. It’s going to be okay.”

“I hate it,” Jinling choked, burying his face in Zixuan’s robes.

“But do you understand?”

There was a moment of hesitation, and then Jinling nodded reluctantly.

“Good,” said Zixuan, kissing the top of his son’s hair. “I’ll make Lanling safe for you, A-Ling. Maybe, by the time Rulan is your age, it will be a clan we can be proud of.”

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All in all, Wei Wuxian was feeling pretty good. Jin Zixun was dead, and sure he hadn’t been tortured to death like he so clearly deserved, but he was still dead. Jin Guangshan was going to be executed tomorrow, and true, it was going to be quicker and more merciful than Wei Wuxian might’ve preferred, but dead was dead. He might’ve fought more for the torture, but it was pretty clear that it would upset Wen Ning. And the Peacock. Truthfully, Wei Wuxian was proud of his brother-in-law – he couldn’t imagine that any of this would be easy for him, and Zixuan had been visibly relieved when Nie Mingjue agreed to lop off his father’s head rather than tear him limb from limb.

At the end of the day, it didn’t matter. They would be dead, and they could never hurt another soul again. Wei Wuxian’s family would be safe, and justice would be served. So Wei Wuxian was happy enough.

He was also really enjoying spending the later part of the evening with Huaisang in the Nie clan’s archives. The records and reports they were pouring over were, for the most part, well over a hundred years old, and he had a suspicion that he might actually be getting somewhere. Most of the texts were not allowed to leave the archive room – a fair rule, in Wei

Wuxian's opinion, given the age and value of the texts, and the secrets held within them – but there were comfortable cushions, and also snacks and wine. He was careful not to drink too much. His tolerance was higher now that he had a golden core again, but it still wasn't quite as it had been, and he needed to keep his mind clear.

He put down the book that he was reading and glanced up at Huaisang, who was frowning at a different text with unusual concentration. It wasn't the look he got when he was focusing on painting, or on poetry – it deeper, and more serious, and it looked very wrong on the face of Nie Huaisang.

“Nie-xiong,” Wei Wuxian said, and Huaisang glanced up. “What do you know about the death of Nie Su? A lot of these texts skirt around it – there's a bad night hunt mentioned, but he seems to have lived another month or so after that, and a cause of death isn't mentioned anywhere.”

“Nie Su?” Huaisang repeated, frowning again. “Uh... I'm not sure. He was... he was the father of Nie Nianzu wasn't he? That Nie Su?”

“That Nie Su,” confirmed Wei Wuxian. “We know Nie Nianzu was the first to die of qi deviation after the building of the Sword Sacrifice Hall, and that the sword spirit started wreaking havoc *after* Nie Nianzu and his sword had been buried, so the general assumption is that it was his sword, but something about it... I have a theory, but I need to know what happened to Nie Su. Particularly, I need to know what happened on the ‘bad night hunt’, and how he died.”

Nie Huaisang reached for a different record, one Wei Wuxian had already flicked through. “Here the cause of death is just-”

“Natural causes,” Wei Wuxian said, nodding, “but that doesn't make much sense. He wasn't even in his sixties, and by all accounts he was a strong cultivator. If it was qi deviation I have no idea why they wouldn't say anything. It could be that he was wounded on that night hunt, and killed by infection or blood poisoning or something like that, and they counted it as natural for that reason, but it still seems odd not to list it.”

“It does,” Huaisang agreed slowly, and then he scrambled to his feet, hurrying to one of the far shelves that Wei Wuxian hadn't looked at yet. On it were hundreds of small, tightly stacked books, with what looked like dates along the spines, and Nie Huaisang scoured through them. “What year did he die, again?” Wei Wuxian read out the date and Huaisang nodded, tugging at a book somewhere in the middle of a pile. It didn't budge. Huaisang scowled, and tugged again, bracing his hand against the books above it, but the little tome still wouldn't move. “Oh for the love of-” Huaisang wiggled the book, and then yanked back with all of his force – which was unfortunate, because the wiggling seemed to have done the trick. The book came free, and Huaisang flew backwards, landing on his backside with a yelp.

Wei Wuxian laughed, and Huaisang glared mutinously at him, though the corner of his lip did twitch towards a smile. Pouting – but also not bothering to get up from where he had landed – Huaisang began flicking through the pages, slowing somewhere towards the end of the

book. “There are records,” he explained distractedly, “Of every official request sent to Qinghe for help.”

Wei Wuxian gave a low whistle, suddenly understanding the sheer volume of books on the shelf. Nie Huaisang nodded, and then grimaced, handing the book to Wei Wuxian.

“You’ll be better at this part, Wei-Xiong.”

Wei Wuxian nodded, taking the book in hand and scanning through the records of the last few requests received before Nie Su’s death. “Here – this one is strange,” he said, tapping at the page. “A village on the outskirts of your borders asked for help with a particularly strong yao – strong enough for clan leader to go himself – but some of the thing’s they’ve reported aren’t consistent with a yao attack at all. They say that several people have been slaughtered, and their hearts ripped out, but the rest of their flesh was left untouched – a yao that strong would be hungry, it would take all the meat from the bones, if it left the bones at all –”

“Okay, okay, enough details!” hurried Huaisang, shuddering, though then he paused. His lip curled back, and then he groaned. “Unless... is there anything that’s relevant?”

“I’m not sure,” said Wei Wuxian, rubbing his jaw. “I could be wrong, but I have a feeling...” He paused, leaning forward. “The leading theory has always been that it’s Nianzu’s sword because he was the first to die of qi deviation, and because it was only after he’d been buried that the blade spirit began to affect other members of the Nie Clan. But what if it was the spirit of his father’s sword? From what I can see, Nianzu had no children, and was succeeded by his cousin – it’s possible, if it was his father’s sword, that at first it showed an excessive attachment to Nianzu, and that’s why it didn’t seep out to affect the rest of the clan. When Nianzu’s cousin became Nie-zongzhu, his blood link to Nie Su was weaker, so the blade may have been less fixated on him.”

“Okay,” said Nie Huaisang slowly. “But so what if it is? Do you think knowing who the sword belonged to will help us fix the problem?”

Wei Wuxian shrugged. “I think knowing what made the blade so resentful and powerful in the first place will help us. The easiest way to know that is to find out who it belonged to.” He paused, and then tapped the small book. “I want to know what happened on that night hunt. Perhaps we should stop by the village, on the way back to Lotus Pier. See if they have any more information on local history.”

Huaisang nodded. “Okay. I’ll come with you. In the meantime, I’ll ask all the elders if they know anything about Nie Su that’s not in the archives.” He paused to give a giant yawn. “Though I think it’s nearly midnight again, Wei-xiong. We should probably do that tomorrow.”

“Alright,” said Wei Wuxian agreeably. He was always up for staying up late, but he knew that Wen Qing wouldn’t sleep until he returned to the room adjacent to hers. She needed her sleep – she never got enough. “Let’s call it a night, then. Is there somewhere we can leave these, to come back to them tomorrow?” The first two nights, Wei Wuxian had just left the books he was studying sprawled around his cushions, only to find that they had been tidied and

reshelved during the day. The second time, he had a sneaky suspicion that the archivists had replaced his pillow with a less comfortable one in retaliation.

Nie Huaisang nodding, hiding another yawn with his sleeve and pointing to a small table with his other arm. Wei Wuxian left the books there and stood up, stretching his arms up and stifling a yawn of his own. Then, he offered a hand to his friend, helping him to his feet.

“What a day...” he sighed as they made their way out of the archives, and Huaisang nodded.

“I’m just glad it’s all nearly over,” he said, and then he pouted. “Da-ge says the next time Qinghe Nie have to hold a conference I have to stick around to help organise it. I told him I was doing important things in Lotus Pier like cheering up sad teenagers, but he said it was no excuse. It’s too much responsibility, Wei-xiong!”

Wei Wuxian smiled, shaking his head. The archives were on the opposite side of the Unclean Realm than the personal and guest rooms, so for the most part the complex was quiet and dark as they made their way through it. “Ah, Nie-xiong... I don’t think you should... What is that smell?” The stench struck Wei Wuxian like a slap to the face, his eyes stinging and the back of his neck aching with the strength of fit, and beside him Huaisang gagged, covering his nose and mouth with his sleeve.

“I don’t know!” he choked, tapping Wei Wuxian’s arm and then pointing at the upcoming corner. “Go and look!”

If it were Jiang Cheng, Wei Wuxian would’ve demanded that he go and look himself, but with Huaisang Wei Wuxian simply rolled his eyes, and strode up to the corner.

The courtyard before them was flooded with what looked – and smelt – like sewage, and Wei Wuxian gagged.

“Ugh, Nie-xiong...”

With much reluctance, Huaisang crept to his side, peering around the corner, too. “Oh! Oh, that’s disgusting! Urgh! I’m going to tell Da-ge, that is gross!”

“And also the way we’re supposed to go...” Wei Wuxian pointed out, the hair on the back of his neck standing up. “Doesn’t it seem a little strange it would flood now?”

“Not necessarily,” said Huaisang, waving his fan rapidly in front of his nose. “There was a problem earlier this week nearer the guest quarters – Zonghui managed to get it fixed before anyone noticed, but it must’ve been a bigger issue than we thought. Urgh, I am *not* going that way. Absolutely not. We’ll take the long way around, past the training grounds and the dungeons,” he declared, turning on his heels and striding back the way they came. With a shrug, Wei Wuxian followed. It was very, very quiet, and their footsteps seemed almost eerily loud against the stone.

A feeling of dread crept up Wei Wuxian’s spine. He paused, grabbing Huaisang’s wrist to stop him, too. His friend frowned.



“Wei-xiong, what’s...?”

“I don’t know,” Wei Wuxian murmured, “I just... I have a bad feeling...”

Huaisang stiffened, looking around. “Wei-xiong, it’s just a problem with the plumbing... We’re in *Qinghe*,” he added, with naïve certainty, and Wei Wuxian shook his head.

“Let’s just go,” said Wei Wuxian, setting off again, but this time he set a brisk pace, so much so that Huaisang was almost jogging to keep up at his side.

And then Wei Wuxian caught a flicker of movement out of the corner of his eye, and he turned –

And something hard and sharp crashed into the back of his head and he pitched forward, pain exploding from the base of his skull. Immediately, a weight landed painfully in the small of his back, as if someone was kneeling on him, and his hands were wrenched up behind him. In the same moment, a rag was stuffed into his mouth, a gag tied painfully tight. He heard Nie Huaisang draw in a breath to scream, and then he heard him choke, and he looked up with pain-hazed eyes to see a hand over Huaisang’s mouth, and a knife pressed into his throat. Fury surged through every one of Wei Wuxian’s veins, and he snarled through the gag, but then the person above him grabbed his hair and smashed his face into the floor. Despite himself, Wei Wuxian choked out a cry of pain as stars swam before his eyes, and he heard Huaisang give a frightened whine.

“Shut up!” hissed one of the men, and then Huaisang whimpered. “I said, shut up!”

“Here’s what’s going to happen,” said another voice, coarser, angrier. “You’re going to take us into the dungeons, and you’re going to tell your guards to release Jin-zongzhu, and my father. Then, you’re going to take us to the gates, and we’re all going to leave together. If you scream or make a fuss, we’ll kill you. If your brother tries to stop us, we’ll slit your throat in front of him. Nod if you understand.”

Wei Wuxian looked up, blinking through the pain to see Huaisang nod frantically. His friend’s eyes were wide with terror, and his face was stark white, and anger blazed through Wei Wuxian once more. Growling, he bucked against the ground, trying to throw the man above him, but then his head struck the ground again, and the coarser voice said, “The next time he struggles, kill him. Jin-zongzhu might want to choose his fate, but its not worth the risk. If he makes trouble, cut his throat.”

“Understood, gongzi.”

Wei Wuxian tensed, but then he forced himself to fall still, breathing in deeply. He couldn’t let them kill him. He couldn’t.

He’d promised A-Yuan and Sizhui he was coming home.

They dragged him to his feet, and his head span so wildly he almost fell straight back down, earning himself a punch to the stomach that had him doubled over.

*What is the point of that if you want me to stand up?* He thought furiously, glaring at the five men around him. They were, of course, all Jin.

Huaisang whimpered quietly, and Wei Wuxian winked at him. They'd be okay. They were both smart, and the Jin usually weren't – they could figure this out. Wei Wuxian would think of something. They'd be okay.

They had to be okay.

He'd promised his sons he was coming home.

But Wei Wuxian knew that if these Jin managed to get him and Huaisang out Qinghe, they were doomed. Two Jin cultivators had their hands on him, iron grips tight around his forearms, and they pushed him down the hall after the man holding Huaisang. Wei Wuxian staggered a little, his head spinning, stomach churning. This was not good. Not good at all.

The guards at the dungeon door saw them coming. There were two of them, a woman and a man, and the woman's eyes narrowed in fury even as the man's widened, his lip curling back in a snarl. In lightning-fast unison, they drew their swords, shock and anger radiating off them.

"Nie-gongzi-" said the woman, but the coarse-voiced Jin pressed his knife tighter to Huaisang's throat, and growled,

"Quiet!"

The Nie woman's nostrils flared, and the male guard clenched his jaw, shifting his grip on his sabre.

"Unless you want to watch your young master die here and now, you are going to open the door, and you are going to retrieve Jin-zongzhu, and Jin Guangli. Then, you're going to let us lock you in their cells, and we'll leave without any fuss."

The woman eyes narrowed further. "Release Nie-gongzi. Now."

The coarse-voiced Jin laughed quietly, and Huaisang shuddered, his face blank with terror. "Are all Nie disciples this stupid? Do you not understand I will kill him, if you don't do what I say?"

"It is you who doesn't understand, Jin," said the woman sharply. "If you release our young master now, we will do you the mercy of killing you here and now, before Chifeng Zun hears of this."

The Jin man scowled. "I will count to three. One -" He twisted the blade at Huaisang's throat, and Wei Wuxian cried out through the gag as he saw a thin line of blood stream down his friend's throat. "Two -" The knife dug deeper, and Huaisang's whine of terror suddenly cut off. His eyes rolled up into his skull, and horror screamed through Wei Wuxian as Huaisang slumped back limp against his captor. "What the fu--"

The Nie woman moved so fast Wei Wuxian couldn't track her, slicing a blow with her blade over Huaisang's head that split the man's face open from cheek to temple. He screeched, but the male Nie guard was already charging at the other men. The woman snatched Huaisang's arm and wrenched him behind her, and somehow Huaisang was stumbling but still on his feet. The Jin holding Wei Wuxian's arms shifted their grip to draw blades of their own, and Wei Wuxian dropped his weight, wrenching free and hitting the ground with a thud.

"Wei-xiong!" Huaisang cried, his voice hoarse and frightened, and Wei Wuxian rolled out of reach of the Jin.

The Nie woman grabbed him by the collar, thrusting him behind her like a misbehaving kitten. Another pair of hands, softer and gentler and trembling, gripped Wei Wuxian's arm, helping him to his feet, but his head spun as he stood, and his stomach lurched.

"Wei-xiong," Huaisang whispered again, wrapping his arms around Wei Wuxian's in either an effort to hold him up, or to comfort himself.

Meanwhile, the Nie man had cut off the sword arms of two of the Jin, and stuck his sword through the gut of a third. The fourth man tried to run, but the woman threw a knife that struck at the base of his spine, and his legs crumpled beneath him.

The fifth and final man, the coarse-voiced man who had hurt Huaisang, was quivering on the ground before them, his hands pressed against his bleeding face as he moaned and sobbed in pain. The Nie woman hesitated a moment, and then stepped forward, taking the Jin's sword and then stabbing it through the top of his arm, pinning him to the ground. He shrieked, and Huaisang gave a gasping sob, looking away.

The Nie woman turned around, her eyes flitting over Wei Wuxian for just a moment before fixing on Huaisang. She put a hand on his shoulder.

"Gongzi, you are hurt," She said, in a voice so gentle it was hard to imagine coming from the same woman. "Let me see."

With a whimper, Huaisang turned his head, lifting it up a little and revealing a nasty cut in the side of his neck. Anger roiled in Wei Wuxian's already churning stomach at the sight of it, and the woman hissed through her teeth. However, when she spoke, her voice was gentle again.

"It's not too bad, Gongzi. You'll be fine. It's a little deep, but I don't think it will even need stitches." She reached into her robes, pulling out a clean handkerchief. "Just press this against it, for me, Gongzi, as firm as you can. It will help the bleeding to slow down."

"Rushi, W-Wei-xiong, he's hurt," Huaisang stammered weakly, and the woman – Nie Rushi, apparently – inclined her head.

"I know. Come here, both of you, sit down..." She guided them to a small bench, and as they sat she removed her cloak, wrapping it around Huaisang's shoulders. "It's alright, Gongzi. It's over now. Wei-gongzi, the swelling on your head is a little alarming – do you feel dizzy, or nauseous at all?"

“Both,” Wei Wuxian admitted, leaning back against the wall behind him and closing his eyes. Immediately, someone pinched his arm, hard, and he winced, flinching away. “Ow!”

“Do not go to sleep, Wei-gongzi,” ordered Nie Rushi. “I apologise for my impropriety, but you must not sleep. You almost definitely have concussion – keep your eyes open.”

Wei Wuxian opened his mouth to protest, but Huaisang was looking at him with fearful, haunted eyes, so Wei Wuxian said nothing. He looked up, and to his surprise realised that the male Nie guard had disappeared. However, more Nie disciples were surging towards them from all directions, and then Huaisang’s breath hitched, and Nie Mingjue ran around the corner, fury and fear plain as day on his face.

“Huaisang!”

“Da-ge!” Huaisang cried, his voice breaking as he stood up to throw himself at his brother. Nie Mingjue’s arms wrapped around Huaisang tightly, one hand sinking into his brother’s hair.

“I’m here,” he said gruffly, his eyes scanning over the scene before him. The rage in his eyes grew hotter when they rested on Wei Wuxian, and then blazed fiercer still at the sight of the Jin cultivators bleeding on the ground. Then he turned back to Huaisang, pushing him away gently to search for him for injuries.

Even Wei Wuxian could see the pain in Nie Mingjue’s eyes when he saw the cut on Huaisang’s neck.

“Da-ge,” Huaisang whispered, and Nie Mingjue took a deep breath.

“What happened?” he asked, his voice low and trembling as his fingers hovered over the wound. “Huaisang, what happened?”

“We – we were coming b-back from the archive, but, but the way was flooded, Da-ge, so we came the long way b-but they came from behind and one of them hit Wei-xiong with a sword and they smashed his head against the floor and p-put – they p-put-” Huaisang broke off with a frightened whine, and Nie Mingjue’s arms were instantly around him, drawing him close again. Huaisang pressed his face against his brother’s shoulder, shaking with every breath he took, and Nie Mingjue turned his eyes to Wei Wuxian.

“They held a knife to his throat and told him to get to tell the guards to release Jin Guangshan and that one’s father.” Wei Wuxian pointed towards the bleeding, moaning man on the floor. “Who I’m guessing is Jin Guangli. They said if they didn’t...” He broke off, and Huaisang gave a choked sob, shuddering again. At once, a furious chorus of muttered curses broke out from the Nie disciples, their rage so palpable it was almost as strong as pure resentful energy.

Nie Mingjue was trembling too, now, his jaw clenched and his eyes alight with sheer fury as he ran a hand over his brother’s hair and held him tight, and anger rose within Wei Wuxian again. It was dizzying. He’d had a knife held to his throat before, he had seen his life rest within someone else’s hands, he already knew what it felt like, but Huaisang... Huaisang had

never been through anything like this before. Huaisang had even escaped battle in the Sunshot Campaign, something Wei Wuxian had always been grateful for.

But if the Jin had succeeded in getting out of Qinghe, Huaisang and Wei Wuxian would've both been killed.

He'd known it.

And so had Huaisang.

"I see," Nie Mingjue said eventually, his voice sounding closer to breaking than Wei Wuxian had ever heard it. "Huaisang, do you want to watch?"

Huaisang shook his head, still shaking violently, and Nie Mingjue nodded. "Rushi – keep them alive until I get back."

"Understood, Nie-zongzhu," she said sharply, and Nie Mingjue put his arm around Huaisang's shoulders, taking most of his weight.

Then, he turned to Wei Wuxian. "Wei-gongzi, please."

Wei Wuxian stood up, but immediately his balance abandoned him, and he would have face planted if Chifeng Zun hadn't flung out an arm to stop him. Wei Wuxian pushed his own arm into his stomach, willing himself not to throw up.

"Wei-gongzi!"

"Da-ge, they hit his head, badly," Huaisang worried, and then there was an arm around Wei Wuxian's waist, taking his weight from the floor.

"I think she might have a point about concussion," Wei Wuxian conceded.

"This is awful..." Huaisang's voice came out strangled and small and deadly serious, and the Nie disciples all bristled.

"Chifeng Zun," said Nie Rushi, her voice tighter than a qin string. "If we ensure that they are all alive, and strong enough to face punishment at your hands...?"

"You will leave enough for me," Nie Mingjue said darkly, and Rushi and the other Nie disciples bowed low.

"Thank you, Chifeng Zun," she said, and the Nie disciples turned on the Jin like a pack of wolves circling wounded prey. The furious hunger in their eyes was enough for one of the Jin to start begging, but Wei Wuxian doubted it would do them any good.

Nie Mingjue steered Huaisang and Wei Wuxian out of eyeshot, marching them back towards the guest rooms.

Behind them, the Jin screamed.

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading, I hope you enjoyed that chapter! I absolutely love and ascribe to the interpretation that the Nie disciples are all very fond and protective of Huaisang at all areas of the timeline, and if you come for him you better be ready to face the wrath of every single last one of them, so I've indulged in that a little in this chapter, lol. Please do let me know if you enjoyed the chapter, or if there's something within it you didn't like and think could be improved!

Until next time, please take care.

# Chapter 56

## Chapter Notes

Hi everyone! Thank you for the lovely response to the last chapter, and for your patience waiting for this one! I hope you enjoy it!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Wen Qing wasn't happy.

Wei Wuxian hadn't expected her to be, but he was a little surprised by just how deep the worry carved into her brow as she examined him, and by the way she closed her eyes and took a deep breath when she was finished. It was as though she'd just finished stitching his guts back together rather than inspecting a couple of knocks to the head.

"Wen Qing, I—"

"Shut up," she said sharply, reaching out and snatching his wrist to send a steady stream of spiritual energy into his wrist. There was a tightness to her voice, one she only got when she was upset. "If you're going to try and tell me that you're fine, or that it isn't that bad, don't."

"I wasn't," Wei Wuxian lied, and she opened her eyes to glare at him.

"If we hadn't—" she cut off, and took another deep breath. "It's not just concussion, Wei Wuxian. The blows were so severe your core immediately went into overdrive to prevent permanent damage, to try and fix the *fracture* in your *skull*, and it's – it's completely depleted your energy supplies, more so than is safe at this stage."

"At what stage?" asked Nie Mingjue, concern in his voice. With how much the world was spinning, he was currently outside of Wei Wuxian's line of view, standing beside Huaisang with his arm wrapped tightly around his little brother.

Wei Wuxian tried to send an unimpressed look at Wen Qing, but he wasn't sure how well it landed – at the moment, it looked very much there were two of her.

"Wei-xiong lost his golden core in the Sunshot Campaign," Huaisang said hollowly, and Wei Wuxian's worry spiked. He had never, ever heard his friend's voice so listless, but when he turned to look for Huaisang the dizziness grew overwhelming, and he tipped forward. Within a second, Wen Ning was there, holding him up. "Wei-xiong!"

"I'm okay, Nie-xiong," Wei Wuxian promised, and Wen Qing scowled, pinching his leg. "Ow!"

“What do you mean Wei Wuxian lost his golden core?” Nie Mingjue asked, and Wei Wuxian winced. It wasn’t that he minded people knowing he hadn’t had one – he’d rather they didn’t, of course, but he had his core back again now, so it was fine. However, he did *not* want anyone else knowing where it had gone.

Thankfully, Huaisang just mumbled, “Wen Zhuliu. He didn’t think to tell us. Wen Qing was able to use the excess energy from the time travellers to form a new core.”

“She - *what?*”

“It’s not important now,” said Wen Qing, her eyes closed as she poured more spiritual energy into him. “The fragments are almost completely fused, but they’re not there yet - if you deplete all of your spiritual energy and pull on your core itself, you could rip it apart. Think qi deviation, but four times worse.”

Wei Wuxian winced, and he heard Huaisang whimper.

“Thanks for that image, Wen Qing,” he muttered, and he would have rolled his eyes if they didn’t already feel like they were spinning.

“D-does, does he need more?” Huaisang asked, his voice very small. “Wen-guniang, I can, I can-”

“Thank you, Nie-gongzi, but I don’t need your help right now,” said Wen Qing calmly. “Besides, you’re in shock – you need to focus on breathing – you need to remember that you are safe. A-Ning, go and brew some tea for him.”

“Okay, Jiejie,” said Wen Ning worriedly, and his hands left Wei Wuxian’s shoulders.

Wei Wuxian closed his eyes, but Wen Qing pinched him again. “Don’t fall asleep.”

“I wasn’t going to,” he grumbled. “But the room won’t stop spinning, and it’s going to make me throw up.”

Wen Qing said nothing – she was still worried, then. Very worried. Wei Wuxian sighed, letting his head bow down and trying to focus less on the dizziness and more on the sounds around him. Wen Ning, bustling around making tea, Huaisang sniffing quietly. Occasionally, he heard the low rumble of Nie Mingjue’s voice, the words far too quiet for him to catch, or the clink of a teacup.

Slowly, the dizziness began to ebb away. The nausea began to fade a little, still uncomfortable, but less urgent, and with a soft sigh, Wen Qing let go. Tentatively, Wei Wuxian raised his head, relief flooding through him when it didn’t immediately send the room spinning again.

“You’re the best, Wen Qing,” he said, smiling, but she still looked grim.

“You’re not healed,” she said. “But the only other thing I can do is keep an eye on you while the concussion runs its course. If you continue drawing on your core, we may have problems.”



“I’m not doing it consciously,” Wei Wuxian pointed out, and she gave him a withering look.

“I am aware of that.”

“Also, you said my core acted to *prevent* permanent damage, which means it probably worked, right? So there’s no permanent damage?” Wei Wuxian said, and Wen Qing sighed.

“I hope so,” she said, her fingers hovering over the growing bruise on Wei Wuxian’s forehead for a moment. To Wei Wuxian’s surprise, she stroked his cheek the way she would Wen Ning’s. Then, much less surprisingly, she said, “You really don’t have much of a brain left to lose.”

“Wen *Qing!*” Wei Wuxian yelped, though he immediately winced as the sound shrieked through his skull.

Wen Qing’s sympathetic smile lasted a split second before she smirked, and turned away from him entirely to look at Huaisang. “How are you feeling, Nie-gongzi?”

Immediately, Wei Wuxian turned his attention back to his friend. Huaisang was still pale, though there was a little more colour in his cheeks than there had been, and he was hunched up with a blanket tucked around his shoulders and an empty teacup in his hand. Nie Mingjue was sitting beside him, his arm wrapped around Huaisang’s shoulders, and Huaisang was gripping his brother’s hand with stark-white fingers. Though he had stopped trembling, there were still tears clinging to Huaisang’s cheeks and his eyelashes, and there were still wells of deep fear in his eyes as he looked up at Wen Qing.

“It doesn’t... it doesn’t hurt so much now, it – I... the tea?” he whispered, and Nie Mingjue’s arm tightened around him.

Wen Qing nodded slightly, gently. “There was something to help the pain in the tea. It should also help you to relax a little – do you feel any calmer?”

Huaisang’s lip trembled, and he swallowed several times before he managed to speak. “I – I don’t think I *should* relax,” he said, his voice breaking slightly. “Sh-shouldn’t I – if I was more prepared or b-braver then-”

“Stop,” growled Nie Mingjue at once, wrapping his other arm around his brother, too. “None of this is your fault, A-Sang. They will be dead by morning. You’re safe, now. You’re safe. I’m here.”

Huaisang sobbed, pressing his face into his brother’s shoulder, and Wei Wuxian’s anger flared again. Nie Mingjue looked furious, too, but his hands looked gentle as they ran over Huaisang’s hair.

“I never – I thought I – I’m *home*.” Huaisang’s words were somewhat mangled by his brother’s chest, but they still managed to land like a blow in Wei Wuxian’s stomach. “I thought at home I – I –”

Nie Mingjue's scowl was darker than Wei Wuxian had ever seen it, but then the older man closed his eyes, pressing his lips to his brother's hair. "I am here. Da-ge's here. You're safe, A-Sang. I promise."

A little hesitantly, Wen Qing stepped forward. "Nie-gongzi, may I check your pulse?"

Obediently, Huaisang thrust out his fist without moving another muscle, keeping himself curled up against his brother's chest. After a moment, she nodded. "The shock has passed – medically speaking. Chifeng Zun, as a doctor I advise Nie-gongzi gets some sleep."

Nie Mingjue nodded. "You'll sleep in my rooms, tonight," he said firmly. "I'll take you there and call for Zonghui to stay with you. Then I'll take care of those spineless *bastards*."

"Okay," Huaisang whispered, letting Mingjue help him to his feet. He looked at Wei Wuxian and swallowed again. "Are – are you going to be okay, Wei-xiong?"

Wei Wuxian smiled wearily. "I've had far worse, Nie-xiong. I'll be fine."

Huaisang nodded, and his brother led him out of the door. Wen Qing sighed, turning back to Wei Wuxian.

"You need to get some sleep, too," she said gravely. "I think you're past the point where that would be dangerous, but I'll monitor you."

"You don't need to watch me all night," Wei Wuxian protested. "You need to sleep too, Wen Qing."

Wen Qing simply raised an eyebrow. "If you don't lie down *now*, I will use needles."

Wei Wuxian scowled, easing himself back down onto the bed. He knew there was no use arguing with her, and he really was exhausted, so instead he said, "If you are staying awake, could you do me a favour?"

"That depends on what it is," said Wen Qing, clearly suspicious.

"Wake me just before five," said Wei Wuxian seriously. "Lan Zhan... he'll panic enough as it is. If it's me that breaks the news he won't have time to worry I'm on my deathbed."

Wen Qing pursed her lips. "You need rest, Wei Wuxian... If you promise to take a nap when I tell you to, I will wake you at five."

"Deal," said Wei Wuxian, closing his eyes. Sleep took him quickly, sucking him down into a darkness where he barely noticed the pain. It felt like only a matter of minutes before Wen Qing gently tapped his shoulder. He groaned, but Wen Qing caught his arm before he could fling it across his face.

"It is nearly five," she said quietly. "You did ask me."

"I did, I did," Wei Wuxian grumbled. His head was pounding, the pain worse than it had been the night before, though he was pleased to note that the nausea and the dizziness had both

faded to almost unnoticeable levels. Wen Qing pressed a hot cup into his hands.

“This will help the pain.”

Wei Wuxian drank greedily, as quickly as he was able to without scalding his throat on the hot tea. Then, he swung his legs out of bed, and stood up. To his relief, he was steady on his feet again, and he nodded at Wen Qing and Wen Ning, who also looked very much like he hadn't slept a wink. Of course, Wen Ning didn't *need* sleep, but he *could* sleep, and he always seemed to feel a little better for it.

“I'll see you at breakfast,” he promised, and they nodded. Wen Qing held out a small knife.

“I'm not clearing you to use Suibian or Chenqing,” she said, “but I won't have you walking around unarmed.”

Given the reaction of the Nie clan last night, Wei Wuxian highly doubted that it would be necessary, but he nodded and took the knife with a small smile. “Thank you.”

Sure enough, when he stepped out of the door, he saw two Nie disciples standing guard at the end of the hall. They bowed when they saw him, and he bowed back, silently slipping through the dark, empty corridors to where he knew Lan Zhan's room to be. As the honourable Hanguang Jun, he wasn't sharing with anyone, so Wei Wuxian didn't have to worry about waking anyone else up. He slipped into the room, catching a glimpse of himself in the mirror as he did. He winced slightly – the bruise was certainly an impressive one – deep and dark and mottled, with a small, ragged line of red where the skin had broken in its centre. He tore his gaze away, looking around for Lan Zhan and expecting to find him up and about, but instead he was still sleeping, looking completely and utterly at peace. So, it wasn't *quite* five yet.

Despite himself, Wei Wuxian smiled, coming to sit beside Lan Zhan's bed. It was ridiculous, really, how much warmth and love could fill his chest at the sight of Lan Zhan sleeping, his face slack and peaceful, unbothered by the world that put so much on his shoulders during the day. Sadly, it was only a few minutes before Lan Zhan began to stir. With a soft little sigh that did something to Wei Wuxian's heart, Lan Zhan shifted, and then his eyes blinked open.

They fell on Wei Wuxian, and a small, sleepy smile lit up Lan Zhan's face –

And then he saw the bruise on Wei Wuxian's forehead, and his eyes widened in fear and anger and alarm, and he drew in a sharp breath.

“I'm okay,” Wei Wuxian said quietly, firmly, reaching out a hand. Immediately, Lan Zhan took it, pushing himself up and staring at Wei Wuxian's face with no trace of sleepiness. “I promise, Lan Zhan, I'm okay. It's okay.”

“Wei Ying,” he breathed, pain on his face as he reached out, fingers hovering over the wound. Then, his pain sharpened into anger, and his grip on Wei Wuxian's hand tightened.

“*Who?*”

“A bunch of Jin, obviously,” said Wei Wuxian, shifting up onto his knees so that he could put a hand on Lan Zhan’s cheek and try and chase the rage from his face. “It’s okay. I’m pretty sure they’re resting in pieces by now, anyway. If it’s any consolation, I wasn’t even the target this time – I was more in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“It is not,” Lan Zhan said, his voice hard. “What happened?”

Wei Wuxian told him, as matter-of-factly as he could, but with every sentence he spoke, Lan Zhan looked more distressed.

“Wei Ying...” he whispered when Wei Wuxian had finished, his fingers gentle as a butterfly’s wings as they brushed over the bruise. The anger in his eyes had only grown stronger, but so had the pain. “Wei Ying...”

“I’m okay,” Wei Wuxian promised quietly, leaning forward to kiss Lan Zhan gently. “I mean it. It’s just a little concussion, and I might’ve accidentally used my golden core a little too much, but it’s fine – do you think Wen Qing would let me be wandering about if I wasn’t okay?”

But Lan Zhan’s frown deepened. “It is only five. Concussion should be treated with rest.”

“I know. But I didn’t want you to hear about it from someone else and worry,” admitted Wei Wuxian, and something in Lan Zhan’s face softened. “I love you.”

“I love you, too,” Lan Zhan replied, easy as breathing, a thousand times more precious. He shifted the hand that was wrapped around Wei Wuxian’s, pressing his fingers to his pulse point. Then he gave a sharp gasp, raising his head. “Wei Ying!”

“I know, I know, my spiritual energy levels are low,” he said, and immediately Lan Zhan began to send a stream of his own energy into him. It was beyond comforting, a warmth and love that filled every part of him, and it wasn’t like he hadn’t expected it, but still... “Lan Zhan, you’ve just woken up.”

Lan Zhan stood up, the stream of energy between them unbreaking. Wei Wuxian stood with him, but then Lan Zhan turned, pushing him gently but immovably towards the bed.

“Lan Zhan-”

“Lie down.”

“Lan Zhan-”

“Rest,” Lan Zhan said, meeting Wei Wuxian’s eyes with a worried gaze of his own. “Please. I will wake you for breakfast.”

“Lan Zhan...” Wei Wuxian repeated, but his resolve was crumble. A moment later, Lan Zhan shattered it entirely with a single word.

“Please.”

“God, you Lan are all so bossy,” he grumbled, lying down, but then Lan Zhan sat beside him, stroking his hair with the hand that wasn’t sending energy into him, and immediately it was almost impossible to keep his eyes open. “Lan Zhan...”

“Rest,” Lan Zhan said, pressing his lips to Wei Wuxian’s forehead, just to the side of the bruise, and Wei Wuxian sighed, letting his eyes drift closed.

Whether it was the new transfusion of spiritual energy or just the presence of Lan Zhan, Wei Wuxian slept better than he had in days, but it wasn’t long before he was woken again. This time, it wasn’t a gentle tap to his shoulder that woke him –

Somewhere outside Lan Zhan’s room, someone was yelling and cursing and storming closer, and Wei Wuxian groaned, rubbing at his eyes and wincing when he caught the edges of the wound.

“Sounds like Jiang Cheng’s heard,” he muttered, blinking the room into view. Lan Zhan was sitting on the bed, but he’d clearly got up at one point because he was now dressed.

“Mn,” he said, frowning towards the door.

The yelling got nearer, and Wei Wuxian pushed himself up in bed, getting upright at the same moment a fist pounded on Lan Zhan’s door. Frown deepening, Lan Zhan stood up, pulling the door open.

“Where is he?” Jiang Cheng demanded, a fury that meant fear in his voice.

“He needs quiet. To rest,” said Lan Zhan pointedly, icily, and Wei Wuxian gave a weary smile.

“I’m here, Jiang Cheng. I’m okay. Lan Zhan...”

Lan Zhan stepped aside, and Jiang Cheng burst into the room, freezing at the sight of Wei Wuxian. “I’m going to kill them.”

“I’d be very surprised if they’re not already dead,” said Wei Wuxian.

“They are. Chifeng Zun said. But I don’t care,” Jiang Cheng growled, stalking over to the bed and shoving Wei Wuxian’s shoulder. Lan Zhan was there in an instant, putting a gentle hand on Wei Wuxian’s shoulder, and then the two were glaring at each other. Wei Wuxian sighed. The pair of them were going to have to get used to fretting over him in different ways.

“I’m okay, Jiang Cheng, really,” Wei Wuxian said wearily, but Jiang Cheng shook his head. The anger was beginning to bleed out of his face, and now he looked more upset than anything.

“Wen Qing said you could have *died*.”

Lan Zhan choked, his hand squeezing Wei Wuxian’s shoulder painfully tight, and Wei Wuxian winced, reaching up to pat Lan Zhan’s hand.

“Only if I didn’t have a golden core, which I do, so it’s fine,” he said calmly, but Jiang Cheng was shaking his head, the fear on his face so strong it was pushing past the anger.

“She said you used up almost all of your spiritual energy – that if you’d used anymore your core would’ve fallen apart and you would’ve gone into qi deviation.”

“Wei Ying!” Lan Zhan whispered, and Wei Wuxian stood up and turned, forcing himself to meet Lan Zhan’s eyes. There was a fear in them so deep it hurt, and Wei Wuxian took his hands and squeezed them gently.

“It could have, but it didn’t,” Wei Wuxian said firmly, making sure to look at Jiang Cheng, too. “I’m fine. Wen Qing’s seen to me. I’m going to be fine.”

“Wei Wuxian...” Jiang Cheng said, pain in his voice, and Wei Wuxian smiled wryly, reaching out to poke his brother’s nose. Jiang Cheng didn’t even bat his hand away.

“It’s okay, Jiang Cheng. I’m okay.” With perfect timing, his stomach rumbled, and he pouted. “Though if we don’t go to breakfast soon, I may starve to death.”

That did manage to make Jiang Cheng scoff, and he pushed Wei Wuxian’s shoulder again. “Idiot.”

Just as they had every other day this week, they joined the rest of their family for breakfast in the private dining room within Lan Xichen’s guest rooms – that way, they could all talk freely away from the prying eyes of the other clans.

However, today all that anyone seemed to want to talk about was how unhappy they were about the previous night’s events. Annoyingly, they all seemed far too concerned about Wen Qing’s dramatic declaration that he could have died. Zizhen and Wen Ning both hovered over Wei Wuxian’s shoulders, their hands twisting in their robes and their concern clear on their faces, and Jinling grabbed his arms and ranted about being more careful, but as he did he called him ‘Xian-Jiujiu,’ and every time he heard it Wei Wuxian couldn’t help but smile. It quite ruined the effect of Jinling’s speech. Lan Xichen’s concern was clear on his face, but he also kept his distance, letting Wei Wuxian have space.

The Peacock, meanwhile, had got himself into quite the state, apparently appalled at himself for *‘letting it happen.’*

“You’re not head of Lanling Jin yet,” Wei Wuxian pointed out. “And even if you were, those idiots would likely have done what they did anyway. It’s not your fault.”

“I was going to ask Huaisang if he wanted to come to Lanling with me,” Zixuan admitted, shaking his head. “He’s much better with people than I am, and... I couldn’t ask it now. Not with Jinlintai the way it is, not after...”

“Wait, you wouldn’t let *me* come to Jinlintai, but you’re taking Nie Huaisang?” cried Jinling, and Zixuan sighed.

“Apparently I am not,” he said. Wei Wuxian studied his brother-in-law carefully. There were deep rings beneath Zixuan’s eyes, and he looked as though the weight of the world was slung across his shoulders. Sympathy stirred in Wei Wuxian’s chest, and he cut over Jinling’s angry retort.

“A-Ling, that’s enough,” he said quietly, and Jinling pursed his lips, wearing the exact same ‘angry-but-actually-just-scared’ face as Jiang Cheng. “I’d really rather not keep talking about it – I’m sure we’ll hear more than enough about it today. So, for now, can we please just eat?”

“Fine,” grumbled Jinling, stabbing angrily at his dumplings.

Wei Wuxian sighed.

It was going to be a long day.

Just as they were finishing breakfast, one of the Nie disciples arrived to tell them that Nie Mingjue had summoned every guest in Qinghe to the main gate.

As they walked out through the gate, Wei Wuxian suspected they’d been summoned a few minutes before the other clans – they were certainly the first to arrive. Nie Mingjue and Nie Huaisang were standing outside their gates, flanked on either side by stony faced disciples, and a few feet in front of them, on their knees, were Jin Guangshan and Jin Guangli. To Wei Wuxian’s grim satisfaction, they both looked worse for the wear – though they were dressed as finely as ever, both men were pale, and Jin Guangli looked almost haggard, his eyes red and bloodshot. No doubt he was mourning his son, Wei Wuxian thought, a twist of wicked vindication in his gut. Jin Guangli had supervised every evil act of the camp. His son had held a knife to Huaisang’s throat – had drawn blood. Wei Wuxian was not sorry at all.

Jin Guangshan, on the other hand, seemed to be trying to appear aloof and indignant, but there was little colour to his cheeks, and his hands were trembling.

*Good.*

Ignoring the two men entirely, Wei Wuxian hurried to Huaisang’s side. The wound on his neck had closed a little, no doubt healed by spiritual energy from Nie Mingjue, but it was still bright red and visible, and it made Wei Wuxian’s stomach curl.

However, when he saw Wei Wuxian, Huaisang’s eyes widened in concern. “Wei-xiong! How – how are you feeling?”

“Me? I’m fine,” Wei Wuxian promised, smiling wryly. “How are you?”

Huaisang dropped his gaze, giving a tiny shrug, and Wei Wuxian’s heart fell. He reached out, squeezing Huaisang’s wrist gently.

“It’s okay, Nie-xiong,” he murmured, so quietly even Nie Mingjue would struggle to hear him. “The fear won’t last forever. I promise.”

Huaisang gave him a weak smile, though then he stiffened, his eyes flickering over Wei Wuxian’s shoulders. The other clans were beginning to stream out of the gate, muttering and

gossiping amongst themselves, and the hand holding Huaisang's fan began to shake far faster than it should.

"We're here," Wei Wuxian promised quietly, at almost the exact same moment that Nie Mingjue shifted his stance, his shoulder brushing Huaisang's.

Taking a deep breath, Huaisang gave a shaky nod, and Wei Wuxian squeezed his wrist, before stepping back to Jiang Cheng's side. The Lan were standing to the side of the Jiang, so Lan Zhan could be at Wei Wuxian's side, and Wei Wuxian leant into him, smiling. Steadily, the crowd grew, until all the clan leaders and their delegations were gathered.

Well, almost all of them. With the exception of the Peacock, Wei Wuxian could not see a single Jin.

With a face like thunder, Nie Mingjue stepped forward, shifting further in front of Huaisang a little as he did.

"Thank you all for gathering at such short notice," Nie Mingjue said gravely, anger trembling through his voice. "Last night, five members of Lanling Jin decided they were unhappy with the outcome of the trial. They thought it would be a good idea to take my brother hostage to get their clan leader and Jin Guangli out of the dungeons – they thought it would be wise to ambush Huaisang and Wei Wuxian from behind, to injure them both. The corpses of these men now lie in pieces beyond the borders of the city."

Furious murmurs broke out among the crowd, but they all fell silent when Nie Mingjue continued.

"Let me make things quite clear – the *only* reason Qinghe Nie has not declared war on Lanling Jin is that we do not believe these actions were sanctioned by Jin Zixuan, who is due to take on the role of acting clan leader when he returns to Lanling."

"The same is said of Yunmeng Jiang," said Jiang Cheng loudly, surprising Wei Wuxian. "I warned you all in Lanling – if anyone should lay a hand on my brother again, Yunmeng Jiang will take that as an act of war. And I meant it."

"Jiang Cheng!" Wei Wuxian hissed, but his brother sent him a look, and so for the moment Wei Wuxian shut up.

"As the trial established, Wei Wuxian has committed no crime that would call his life to be forfeit," Jiang Cheng declared, glaring at the assembled clan leaders as he did so. "We don't want another war, but if anyone tries to kill my da-ge again, there will be."

Jin Zixuan stepped forward, bowing first to Nie Mingjue, then Jiang Cheng. "On behalf of Lanling Jin, I thank you both for your patience, and apologise most fully for the sins of my kinsmen."

Nie Mingjue nodded sharply. "The remaining members of the Jin sect present in Qinghe have been interrogated - those who have claimed ignorance are currently in the dungeons, but will be released to your custody to do with what you will," he said to Zixuan, before turning back



to the crowd. “In light of these actions, Qinghe Nie calls to bring forward the executions – to now.”

Another ripple of murmuring and whispering ran over the crowd, and Jin Guangshan gave a bitter laugh.

“Ah, Nie Mingjue, are you so afraid of a second attempt? Of course, we all know your brother couldn’t defend himself from a-”

There was a flash, and Wei Wuxian blinked –

And Jin Guangshan’s head hit the floor.

Jin Zixuan choked out a strangled gasp, and Wei Wuxian heard Wen Qing breathe in sharply behind him. He glanced over his shoulder quickly – she was staring at the severed head with a strangely blank expression, while beside her Wen Ning was staring pointedly at his toes. Jiang Cheng looked satisfied, though he had also positioned himself in front of Jinling, blocking his view. Zizhen was staring down at his toes.

There was the sound of a blade cutting through air, and Baxia returned to Nie Mingjue’s hand. Jin Guangshan’s torso hit the ground with an undignified thud, and then Nie Mingjue stepped forward, swinging his blade down once more, and then Jin Guangli’s head fell too, his body titling forward and spilling its lifeblood into the dirt beside Jin Guangshan’s.

Wei Wuxian knew it wasn’t completely over, not exactly – there would be others in Lanling loyal to Jin Guangshan, lots of them, but nevertheless he felt a huge sense of relief wash over him.

Silence followed, heavy and cold and broken only by the far away caw of a crow. It sounded almost mournful, which was a little funny, but then Wei Wuxian winced slightly, glancing over his shoulder.

Jin Zixuan was pale, his head bowed, eyes closed. Jinling was pressed up against his side, looking anxiously at his father’s face. Nie Mingjue slid Baxia back into her sheath.

“I will say it just one more time,” he growled. “If you harm my brother, you will bring the wrath of the entire Nie sect down upon you.”

A cacophony of muttering and whispering and gossiping followed his words. If he thought he might be someone Jin Zixuan would want to talk to he would’ve turned and asked if he was alright, but he didn’t think they were that close, so Wei Wuxian took the opportunity to turn to his brother.

“Jiang Cheng!” he hissed. “You can’t just threaten war on people who try to hurt me!”

Jiang Cheng glared at him. “Why not? You’re my brother – of course I can.”

“Yes, but...” Wei Wuxian shook his head. “It’s... me. People hate me, they think I-”

“So?” demanded Jiang Cheng, glaring over at Ouyang-zongzhu and Yao-zongzhu. “There’s plenty of people I hate, too, but you don’t see me bashing their heads into floors.”

“Well yes, but-”

Jiang Cheng rounded on him, grabbing the front of his robes. “Listen to me, you idiot – I am head of Yunmeng Jiang, and you are my brother. I can, and I will. So deal with it.”

“I-” Wei Wuxian began, but his brother’s eyes flashed, and Wei Wuxian realised there was worry behind this anger, too. He smiled meekly, and gave a little nod, squeezing Jiang Cheng’s hand where it was still grabbing his robes. “Okay, Jiang Cheng. Okay.”

Jiang Cheng studied his face for a moment, and then nodded sharply, letting go and then straightening Wei Wuxian’s robes with a scoff, as though he hadn’t been the one to mess them all up.

“At least we can go home now,” he muttered.

“Ah, about that,” Wei Wuxian began, and Jiang Cheng looked up at him with a face like thunder.

“No.”

“Jiang Cheng-”

“No. You’re in no state to run off on some stupid side-quest-”

“It’s not – I just want to stop by a little village on the borders of the Nie territory – we probably won’t need to be there more than a day!”

Jiang Cheng’s eyes narrowed, and Wei Wuxian could feel stares of similar intensity boring into him from Lan Zhan and Wen Qing. “Why?”

“For research,” Wei Wuxian said. “There was a night hunt there that went bad-”

“No.”

“Over a hundred years ago!” Wei Wuxian said quickly, reaching up to put a hand over Jiang Cheng’s mouth, though his brother, clearly expecting the move, dodged and swatted his hand away. “Anyway, I think it would be good to know what really happened and they might have records, or local histories, even local legends! There’s absolutely no reason to believe that anything is currently amiss in that village, or that there’d be any reason for me to do any cultivation whatsoever,” he aimed that part mainly at Wen Qing, whose lips were pursed, and eyes narrowed. “Maybe if there are some useful ghosts there Lan Zhan could talk to them through inquiry but that would be about it!”

Jiang Cheng stared at him for a long moment. Then, he said, “No.”

Wei Wuxian sighed. “Jiang Cheng, this is important.”

“So is your life!” Jiang Cheng snapped, and Wei Wuxian took a deep breath as Lan Zhan winced.

“I know, Jiang Cheng,” he said, as sincerely as he could, reaching out to squeeze his brother’s wrist. “I really don’t think there’ll be any danger in it, I promise. Besides, I promised A-Yuan and Sizhui I’d be back in a week at the latest, and I have no intention of breaking my word.” He paused, and squeezed Jiang Cheng’s wrist again. “A-Cheng, trust me. Please.”

Jiang Cheng’s jaw clenched, but then he sighed, shaking his head. “We’re all going.”

“Okay,” said Wei Wuxian brightly, and Jiang Cheng rolled his eyes.

“I can’t,” said Zixuan quietly, and they all turned to him. His eyes were open, but it took him a long moment before he was able to tear them from the ground. “I have to go back to Lanling. If members of Lanling Jin are already – I wanted to see A-Li first, but I have to go as soon as the conference is over. The sooner I get some sort of control over the sect... and...” He paused, turning to Nie Mingjue and bowing low. “Chifeng Zun, I ask for your permission to take my father’s body back to Lanling for burial.”

Nie Mingjue inclined his head.

It was unfortunate, really that Jin Guangshan had to be the Peacock’s father – Wei Wuxian felt very much like celebrating the man’s very timely demise, but Jin Zixuan was so quiet and still in his guilt and his grief that Wei Wuxian felt he should probably wait until his brother-and-law couldn’t see him.

Eventually, some Nie disciples stepped forward to cart the bodies away, and the other clans began to mull their way back inside. However, a figure in the distance caught Wei Wuxian’s eye – a lone figure riding their way on a large, dark horse.

“Huh,” he said, shielding his eyes from the sun in an attempt to get a better look. “They’re late for the conference.”

Nie Mingjue, who was still nearby, gave a heavy frown, following Wei Wuxian’s gaze. “No one invited was absent...”

“Intriguing,” said Wei Wuxian, as the Nie disciples circled closer to Huaisang, clearly on high alert after the night before. However, it wasn’t long before the rider’s face grew visible, and Wei Wuxian’s heart rose as Jin Zixuan gave a sigh.

“Thank goodness,” he said wearily, rubbing a hand over his jaw before smiling a little, and raising his hand in greeting.

“Mianmian!” Wei Wuxian cried in surprise, and Nie Mingjue raised his eyebrows.

“Luo-guniang?” he asked, and Wei Wuxian frowned slightly.

“Wait, who?”

Jin Zixuan frowned at him. “You are aware that her given name is not Mianmian?”

“Well, yes, but she never did tell me her real name in the end. How would I know?”

“Luo Qingyang,” said Jin Zixuan fondly, looking back to the nearing rider. “Her name is Luo Qingyang.”

“Mianmian!” Wei Wuxian called again, waving, and Jin Zixuan rolled his eyes.

Mianmian smiled at him, though she looked a little surprised to see him. A moment later, she was before them, dismounting, and with a start Wei Wuxian realised that the robes she was wearing were much less fine than he would have expected, and in a gentle shade of teal rather than gold.

“Mianmian,” said Jin Zixuan, with less volume but more relief. “Thank you for coming.”

“Of course,” she said, smiling at him with fond exasperation. She paused to bow and greet them all properly, but then her eyes fell on the blood still soaking the dry ground outside the gates, and they widened. Her face hardened, and she looked back to Jin Zixuan. “What’s going on? What do you need?”

To Wei Wuxian’s surprise, Jin Zixuan replied with another question. “How much do you know about the investigation into Lanling Jin?”

Mianmian pursed her lips for a moment. “Very little. I know it was happening – what was it about?”

“Wait,” Wei Wuxian interrupted, “how do you not know what it was about?”

The others went still around him, and Mianmian’s mouth dropped open slightly. Then, she inclined her head, giving a small, weary smile.

“I suppose you wouldn’t know,” she said. “I ceded from Lanling Jin, Wei-gongzi. Nearly two years ago.”

“*What?* Why?” Wei Wuxian asked, stunned.

Mianmian paused for a moment, and then met his eye. “I left Lanling Jin the morning after you freed the Wen from Qionggi Pass. I took issue with Jin Zixun describing your actions as ‘indiscriminate killing,’ and suggested that the guards were lying about not having mistreated the prisoners to protect themselves.” A bitter smile tugged at the corner of his lip. “Of course, Yao-zongzhu was quick to say I was simply overemotional, and felt indebted to you after what happened in the Xuanwu Cave. My own clan agreed – so I left. I didn’t want to stay in a clan that would ignore me and ridicule me because I’m a woman.” Wei Wuxian’s horror must have shown on his face, because her smile grew fond again. “It was not *just* about you, Wei-gongzi. And I’ve been well – I’ve been working as a rouge cultivator, and it’s very rewarding.”

“Well, you were more than right to be suspicious of the guards, Mianmian,” said Jin Zixuan heavily, and then he gave a quick rundown of the trial, its results, and the executions. By the end of it, Mianmian’s eyes were round as the moon, and Jin Zixuan sighed. “I know it is a lot

to ask, but I was hoping you wouldn't mind returning to Jinlintai with me – just for a while, if you don't want to stay. But I need to make sure this can never happen again, and I cannot do it alone."

Mianmian pursed her lips for a moment. "You know it will anger people if you bring me back? I left the clan."

"I know," admitted Zixuan. "But I need someone I can trust."

Mianmian took a deep breath, and then nodded. "Okay."

Jin Zixuan blinked. "Okay?"

"Okay," she repeated, smiling slightly. "I will help you."

Jin Zixuan looked overwhelmed. "Thank you, Mianmian."

"Sorry," said Jinling loudly, bluntly. "Who is this?"

"Ah," said Jin Zixuan, smiling a little. "Jinling, Zizhen, this is Luo Qingyang-"

"Mianmian," corrected Wei Wuxian, and Mianmian glared at him. It would be an alarming look, if she wasn't so clearly trying not to smile.

"Mianmian, this is Jiang Cheng and A-Li's cousin, Yu Jinling, and Wei Wuxian's cousin, Wei Zizhen," Zixuan explained.

"I can't believe that you wanted me to come to Jinlintai for Rulan's one month and I wasn't even going to get to see Mianmian," said Wei Wuxian, shaking his head and mock-scowling at Jin Zixuan. "Obviously, I wanted to spend all my time with Shijie, but I was hoping to talk to someone human while she was busy doing official things!"

"Mianmian *was* in Jinlintai," said Jin Zixuan, a tad defensively. "Of course I still invited her to Rulan's one month celebration – no one complained about it, because they were all too busy complaining about you."

Jiang Cheng snorted. "Sounds about right."

"Lan Zhan, the Peacock is bullying me!" Wei Wuxian protested, turning to Lan Zhan and immediately falling into a memory.

*"You should not flirt with someone if you don't mean it."*

*Wei Wuxian pouted, glancing at Lan Zhan out of the corner of his eye. "I didn't flirt with you, anyway." Something clenched in Lan Zhan's jaw, and Wei Wuxian grinned as the realisation struck him. "I see!"*

*Lan Zhan looked up at him sharply. "You see what?"*

*"I see you like Mianmian!"*

At the time, Wei Wuxian had thought the expression on Lan Zhan's face had been shock at either the correctness of Wei Wuxian's guess, or his audacity at saying it. Now, he knew far better.

"What the hell are you smiling about?" asked Jiang Cheng suspiciously, and Wei Wuxian let his grin grow. If the redness of his ears and the shy smile on his lips was anything to go by, Lan Zhan was remembering the Xuanwu cave, too.

"Lan Zhan," he said, "I'm an idiot."

Lan Zhan's smile grew slightly. "Mn."

"Well, we all know that," said Jiang Cheng, but then Huaisang tutted, the first sound that he'd made since the execution. Wei Wuxian had almost forgotten that he was there.

"Jiang-xiong," he said in a stage-whisper, "they're clearly having a moment."

"They're not married yet! They're not allowed to have moments."

For a split second, Lan Zhan's eyes flickered to Jiang Cheng in irritation, and then he stepped forward, sinking his hand into Wei Wuxian's hair and leaning in to kiss him.

"Oh, for god's sake," muttered Jiang Cheng, and Wei Wuxian couldn't help but laugh a little, his lips still against Lan Zhan's.

And Lan Zhan smiled.

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! Please do let me know what you think if you'd like to leave a comment, I love hearing from you. Until next time, please take care!

# Chapter 57

## Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for all your lovely comments on the last chapter, and for all your patience! I'm sorry this one's a little late in coming, but work has been pretty busy! I hope you enjoy the chapter, and that it's worth the wait!

NOTE: Again, as we look into the Nie sabre spirit I'm not sure how much of what I've written aligns with canon, or with cultivation theories/tropes in general. I hope if it diverges a lot you can forgive me for the sake of the story, but if for any reason anything I've written is horrifically wrong or offensive please do let me know!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

By all appearances, Fang Village was a perfectly lovely place. Named for the family that had first settled it, whose descendants still accounted for half of the village, it was far from a wealthy place, but the crops looked strong and plentiful, and the houses seemed clean and well-kept, if also well-worn. Geographically speaking, it was a little isolated – the nearest town was a good two day walk away, and the nearest cultivation family was Qinghe Nie. By sword, it had taken them little over an hour to get there, but it would take nearly a week to walk. The mountain that loomed on the village's western side made travel in that direction all but impossible for non-cultivators.

They touched down outside the gates, which were open and unguarded, and surrounded on either side by wildflowers. Within the village, Wangji could see children playing in the streets. They looked up at the cultivators as they landed, and their eyes widened in shock. One boy cocked his head as he stared at them, while his companion ran away with a cry of 'Nainai!' It didn't seem a frightened cry, more of a holler for attention, and then a man poked his head around the gate, clearly looking for what had made the boy yell in the first place.

"Ah! Uh, cultivators," he said, bowing low and then risking awkwardly, desperately trying to rub the soil off his hands. "Is, uh, is there something we can help you with?"

"We hope so," said Wei Ying cheerfully, swiftly introducing each of their group by name. The man looked a little overwhelmed.

"I cannot imagine what we can do for such honourable clan leaders," he said worriedly, his eyes flickering between Nie Mingjue, Xiongzhong, and Jiang Wanyin.

"Well, we're just passing through," said Wei Ying. "But don't worry about their being clan leaders! They wouldn't be here at all, except I dragged poor old Huaisang into some trouble the other day and now neither of our brothers trust us to go anywhere alone," he joked.

"Zewu Jun's only here because he promised to visit his nephew in Lotus Pier, and that's

where we're heading next." Wei Ying paused to take a breath, which was probably a good thing for the man at the gate, who looked positively perplexed. "We're here for a project of mine – a history project."

At that moment, an elderly woman came walking quickly down the street, a child skipping eagerly at her side. The man turned, and seemed to relax at the sight of her. He bowed to the cultivators once more.

"Fang Mei is the head of our village," he said. "I'm sure she'll be much better positioned to help you than I am."

"Thank you," said Wei Ying warmly, returning the bow and then bowing to Fang Mei. After yet another quick round of introductions, he said, "I was wondering if you keep any records of local history? I found record of a night hunt over a hundred years ago that took place in this village, and it as noted as being a little strange, but no further details were added."

To Lan Wangji's surprise, the woman breathed in sharply, pursing her lips. "Over a hundred years, you say?"

"That's right. Nie Su would have led the hunt."

Fang Mei paused, her wrinkled brow furrowed in concern. "Perhaps you better come with me," she said quietly. "I believe I know a little of the story you wish to hear – it is not a tale for little ears." The hair on the back of Lan Wangji's neck stood up, though Wei Ying just looked excited and curious. "I am afraid there's not quite enough space for you all inside my home, however. I have room for five at most."

"That's okay," said Wei Ying easily, even as uncertainty straightened Wangji's spine. "Chifeng Zun, Huaisang?" The Nie men both nodded, and then Wei Ying turned, smiling at Lan Wangji. He didn't ask, but he didn't need to. There was no way Wei Ying was going anywhere without him. Not for a long while.

"Wait..." began Jiang Wanyin, but Wei Ying waved his hand.

"It's okay, Jiang Cheng. You hold the fort out here."

"We were playing a good game," said one of the children a little shyly. "You can join in if you'd like."

"A-Song, I don't think Jiang-zongzhu wants to play with you," said Fang Mei, but Wei Ying shared a glance with his brother that Wangji could almost read. *There's no danger here, it seemed to say. If we call, you'll hear us.*

Jiang Wanyin rolled his eyes, but then he turned to A-Song and said, "How do you play?"

"This way," said Fang Mei softly, and Wangji, Wei Ying, and the two Nie brothers followed her through the village.

It really did seem peaceful enough. They passed a small pen with chickens inside, and the birds looked well fed and healthy. There were many tended garden beds, and when they



passed the well, Wangji caught a glimpse of good, clean water inside. Nothing seemed amiss, and it was true that they had seen or heard nothing that would suggest there was any danger at all, but Wangji still felt a cool knot of worry in his stomach. Simple reconnaissance missions were seldom so simple when Wei Ying was involved, and Lan Wangji did not want another reminder of how fragile his life could be.

Every time he looked at Wei Ying, his eyes were drawn to the bruise on his forehead, and Jiang Wanyin's words clenched in his chest.

*"Wen Qing said you could have died."*

He could have died. He *would* have died, if they hadn't already succeeded in the core transfer. Lan Wangji would have woken up and Wei Ying –

Wei Ying would have been gone.

It was frightening, how much the very thought of that hurt. It had not happened – Wei Ying was alive, and Wen Qing said there was no permanent damage, that he was lucky, that he would be fine. But Lan Wangji's heart still ached, a physical, gnawing pain in his chest that grew stronger every time he thought of it, every time his eyes caught that awful, horrible bruise. It was as though the ghost of the pain that would have been haunted him, clawing through his mind and his body with talons sharp as swords.

Now, they were in a small, pleasant looking village, and Wangji felt as apprehensive as he had going into the temple of the Dancing Fairy on Dafan Mountain. One small mercy was that this time, Wei Ying seemed to have noticed Wangji's fear. Lan Wangji knew that the gentle smiles and the near constant touching were mostly for his benefit.

As they entered Fang Mei's house, Wei Ying was so close to Wangji's side that their arms brushed with every step, and every now and again Wei Ying's fingers tapped around Wangji's teasingly, as though they were about to entwine. The house was also unassuming – neat and clean but old, and in places very well-worn. They passed through a small courtyard, and Fang Mei spoke quietly to a woman gardening there, who nodded and hurried inside. They then moved into the living room, and Fang Mei gestured for them all to sit.

"A-Lin will bring us some tea shortly," she said. "I am afraid it is likely not the standard that you are used to, but..."

"Oh, please don't worry about that," Wei Ying said warmly as he sat down. Wangji sat beside him, their knees pressed together. "I can promise I've had far worse." He gave a soft laugh, looking at Wangji. "And I've offered far worse, too. When you came to visit us in Yiling we had no tea at all, did we Lan Zhan?"

Lan Wangji nodded, and Wei Ying's smile softened. A few moments later, the woman from the courtyard arrived with the tea. Though it was perhaps a little more bitter than Wangji's usual preference it was still nice enough. When they were all settled, Fang Mei took a deep breath.

"What is it you wish to know about that night?"

“Anything you can tell us,” said Wei Ying immediately. “We had a look in the records, but all we could find was the initial call for help, and a note that something had gone wrong. That’s all we know.”

Fang Mei nodded slowly, her eyes aimed at the teacup in her hands, but unfocused. Faraway. “I see... It is a memory this village has carried for over a hundred years, the story of that night. Folk don’t like to talk about it, or to hear about it – that’s why this conversation must happen behind closed doors. People are afraid, you see. That it might come back.”

“That what might come back?” pressed Wei Ying gently. “It wasn’t a yao, was it?”

Fang Mei’s eyebrows furrowed a little, and she shook her head. “I don’t rightly know, Weigongzi. There are no cultivators in this village. Cultivators rarely visit us, and we rarely have need to call them. My knowledge of such things is scarce. But I do know that the thing Nie Su-zongzhu hunted that day, the thing that brought such horror onto our village, was a demon.”

Wangji stiffened, and he heard Huaisang breathe in sharply.

“How can you be sure, if you know so little of these matters?” asked Nie Mingjue. It would have been easy for him to make the question interrogative, or patronising, but somehow he sounded only interested.

“That is what Nie Su-zongzhu called it.”

“Could you start at the beginning?” said Wei Ying. “When did the villagers first start to notice something was wrong?”

“A week or so before they called for help, so the story goes,” said Fang Mei heavily. “Two young men disappeared, on their way back from hunting. The carcass of the deer they’d caught was found, along with their bows, but it was several days before *their* bodies were found, mutilated and torn apart. Within that time another six men were killed – the demon was no longer confined to the woods, but coming nearer to the village. The elders sent word to Qinghe Nie to beg for aid, with all the information that they could imagine was relevant, but by the time they arrived, thirteen more men were dead.” She paused, her voice sounding sad. “They were all men, and all young. My grandmother lost both of her brothers – almost an entire generation of men was lost. But for whatever reason, the demon *only* seemed interested in men of their age. One man was killed in the company of his wife – she was unharmed. Another was travelling with his elderly father and young son, and they bore no more injuries than a scraped knee, on the boy’s part.”

Lan Wangji felt himself frown, and Nie Mingjue voiced his thoughts for him.

“For a demon to leave any alive at all... it implies that the beast had near human consciousness...”

“Is that even possible?” asked Huaisang, and Wei Ying nodded.

“Very, very rare. But yes, it’s possible.” He turned back to Fang Mei. “Please, continue.”

But Fang Mei bit her lip, looking nervously at Nie Mingjue. Lan Wangji stiffened slightly as tension prickled through the room. He could see no reason to move his hand to Bichen's hilt, but what if it was a trap? What if this elderly, fragile looking woman was actually a threat, or a decoy? What if –

He startled slightly as his hand hit something unexpected, something soft and warm and not at all the reassuring grip of Bichen's hilt. He glanced down, and saw Wei Ying's hand wrapping around his, squeezing gently.

“Is there a problem?” asked Nie Mingjue, and the woman hesitated.

“I... We do not wish for any trouble, Nie-zongzhu, nor have we ever wished any ill-will toward the Nie sect. But when... when *it* happened... Nie Su-zongzhu ordered that no one speak of it ever again, that no records should be left, but... one of the village elders was afraid that one day the beast would come back, that we would need all the information we could get. Fang village knows nothing of night-hunting, but it was clear that the outcome was unexpected. So the elder wrote an account of what he saw, and we keep it tucked away, as secure as we can. The information is passed down only through the heart of the Fang family, to those who in one day may act as head of the household...” She hesitated again. “I can fetch the account for you, but I pray that Qinghe Nie will not hold it against us.”

“We will not,” swore Nie Mingjue, and Wangji could see a bite of wary hope in his eye. “If anything, the information could be of great use to us.”

The old woman's eye widened. “Oh, alright...” She started to move, and then winced slightly, casting an apologetic glance at them. “Ah... old knees, I'm afraid. A-Lin!”

At the call, the younger woman returned to the room. “Muqin?”

“Ah, A-Lin. Would you please fetch the chest from my bedroom? The one behind the painting.”

A-Lin's eyes widened, but she nodded and bowed, hurrying away. The house was so small that it was barely a minute later that she returned, and old, time-worn case in her hands. Once, it might have been carven, but the patterns had been worn away by hundreds upon hundreds of hands. It must have been in the village even before the demon struck...

Carefully, Fang Mei reached into the box and pulled out a home-spun cloth pouch, from which she pulled an old, yellowed scroll. She hesitated for a moment, and then passed it to Wei Ying.

Wei Ying glanced at Nie Mingjue, and at his nod, he began to read aloud.

*“I know that in writing this account, I may draw the ire of Qinghe Nie to Fang village. I hope and pray that I will not, that they will never know that such a record even exists, but I must take the risk of recording it. Should the Demon return, any poor soul brave enough to try and help us should know what befell the men who, by their claim and the word of others, are among the strongest cultivators of their generation. It is likely, should the Demon return, that*

*we will be beyond help, that our village will be nothing more than blood and ruins before any cultivator can reach us, but I do not know what else to do, and I cannot do nothing.*

*I pray the Demon does not return. That whatever it was I saw somehow destroyed it, or suppressed it. But I cannot trust to my prayer. I can only record what I know.*

*It was past midnight, when it occurred. I would not have been awake, but for the crying of my youngest grandson. Whether he was woken by a nightmare, or sensed the thing that killed his father, I do not know. I heard the cultivators outside, and I could not help but peer through the window.*

*If there are words in the human language that may truly describe the Demon, I do not possess them. In form it was large as a bear, but somehow shaped more like a human, but that was as far as I could see. Its entire being was shrouded in thick, black smoke, all save for its eyes, that shone blood red in the light of the moon. They fixed on me, those eyes – for a moment, I thought I was dead. But the Demon turned away, turning back to the cultivators. I saw that there were strands of glowing golden string tangled around its legs, that some of the cultivators were pulling at it, but it seemed to do nothing. I watched, and it struck two of the men with a blow that struck their heads from their bodies. I was too afraid to flee, though I could not make much of the fight. The entire street was filled with the heavy, black smoke, and the flashes of light from the cultivators made little sense. After some time, one of these lights dispelled the smoke – I could see only three of the cultivators still standing. At their lead, Nie-zongzhu looked badly wounded, but he raised his sword and charged one final time. His blade seemed to glow red in his hand, and it struck through the Demon.*

*The noise that came next was such that my ears bled – a shrieking, piercing whistle of a screech from the Demon, an agonised scream from Nie-zongzhu, and so many cries from the other townsfolk watching through their windows. By the ache of my throat, I guess that I screamed too, though I cannot remember doing so. It was a sound louder than I ever imagined sound could be, and the ground beneath my feet trembled. Red light began to split the dark smoke apart, glowing stronger until I could no longer look at it. I could feel its heat blazing across my face, its brightness burning my eyes through my eyelids, and I fell to my knees.*

*It grew quiet. I heard the Nie disciples call to their clan leader, heard footsteps, and then a moan of pain, and I dared peer out of the window again.*

*The Demon was gone. Black smoke curled around Nie-zongzhu's blade, and he clutched at his chest. Blood spilled from his mouth. From the looks on their faces I knew that such an outcome was neither normal nor expected. Indeed, when they departed the next day, they swore the entire village to secrecy, forbidding us from speaking or writing of the event ever again.*

*I bear guilt for breaking that oath, but I cannot in good conscience do otherwise. I will ensure that the knowledge is passed down through the years, but also that it is kept close. In the end, Qinghe Nie did us a great service, and I would not repay that by bringing damage upon their sect.*

*Fang Wen."*

“Well,” said Nie Huaisang, his voice a little hollow. “That certainly sounds...”

In truth, Lan Wangji did not know how he would describe the account either. A demon of such immense power and awareness... that was exceedingly rare. Moreover, he had never heard of any sword or blade that could make a demon vanish with a good strike, even a lower-level demon.

“Fang Mei,” said Wei Ying. Lan Wangji could see ideas sparkling in his eyes, hear the thinly veiled excitement in his voice as he asked, “Did you ever find out where the demon came from? Were there any odd events or strange things that happened before the first attacks?”

“No, we did not,” said the old lady uncertainly. “And if there were odd things, they have long since been forgotten.”

Wei Ying nodded, looking unperturbed. “I have one more question – are there any caves nearby? Or pits or wells... Somewhere that somebody or something could get trapped, for instance?”

Fang Mei frowned. “Well... There’s the old black well, about a mile or so east, I suppose, but that’s all covered up, so nobody could fall into it.”

“What can you tell us about the black well?”

Fang Mei’s frown deepened. “That it is a well, and its stones are black. It was dug hundreds of years ago, but after the first village was destroyed in a flood it was rebuilt here instead, and the old well was abandoned. Even if it wasn’t covered, there’s enough trees and foliage covering it that it would be mightily difficult to fall down. I’ve never heard of their being any trouble out there.”

“Wonderful,” said Wei Ying, and he sounded sincere. Wangji suspected that he had a theory about the well, though he wasn’t entirely sure what it might be. He might have been better at working it out if his mind wasn’t still searching for a more immediate threat, if his gut was not still curled tight with a worry that had nothing to do with the tale of the immensely powerful demon. “I think that’s all we need,” Wei Ying continued. “But you have been most helpful, Fang Mei. Thank you.”

“Not at all,” she said, looking a little surprised.

“We won’t tread on your hospitality any longer,” Wei Ying said, and they rose. Wei Ying held out a hand to help Fang Mei to her feet, and she smiled at him, even as her wary eyes flickered between him and Nie Mingjue.

“I do dearly hope we have not upset Qinghe Nie,” she said, and Nie Mingjue shook his head.

“You have not,” he said firmly. “If your information is what we hope it will be, we will be indebted to you. If not... we appreciate that the secret has been kept for so long, and that it was only kept at all to protect your people. If you are ever again in need of the assistance of cultivators, please do not hesitate to send word to us.”

She bowed low, and led them back out of the house. The street was a little louder now, and a small crowd had gathered. Anxiety crawled up the back of Wangji's neck, but the shouts he could hear sounded excited, and the sound of laughter rose above them all. When they returned to the gates, they found that Jiang Wanyin, Jinling, Zizhen, and Xiongzhong had all joined in the children's game, though Wen Qing and Wen Ning were standing to the side, watching with small smiles. Wei Ying startled to see Xichen among the players, deftly kicking the ball against the wall, but Wangji was not surprised. Xichen had always enjoyed games and laughter, though he had rarely been allowed to indulge in them, with their father locked away in seclusion. Here, the name Zewu Jun meant little, and if Jiang-zongzhu was to join the game, there was no reason why Lan-zongzhu could not.

No one deigned to interrupt, so it wasn't until the game naturally ended that anyone suggested they leave. There were a few protests from the children, and the adults of the village shook their heads, their weather-beaten faces quick to smile.

They gifted Fang Mei some trinkets for her troubles, small but valuable things, and then they made their goodbyes.

"Thank you again!" Wei Ying called, waving as he stepped onto Bichen. At once, Wangji wove his arms around Wei Ying tightly, holding him perhaps closer than was proper. Wei Ying did not protest, instead covering one of Wangji's hands with his own and leaning back against his chest. "Right! Time to go see the creepy well."

"The *what*?" demanded Jiang Wanyin. "No, absolutely not."

"It's not dangerous, Jiang Cheng," Wei Ying said, rolling his eyes, but Wangji's concern grew, and he tightened his grip. "I promise," said Wei Ying again, more gently. "If there's any sign of danger, you can toss me over your shoulder and fly me to safety, Lan Zhan."

Reluctantly, Wangji nodded, and they set off to the east. Since they weren't travelling far, and were looking for something in the woods themselves they flew but a foot or so off of the ground, though no one suggested they walk. By sword it should take a matter of minutes, and they had a long way to go to Lotus Pier – Wangji was not the only one who wished to return swiftly. On the way, Wei Ying filled in the others on Fang Mei's story, and Wangji watched the woods, his eyes flickering through the trees in search of any sign of danger. A wisp or resentful energy, or an unnatural stillness, or the rustle of a monster. He saw nothing, but his fear remained.

"A demon that was conscious enough to choose its victims, and not simply slaughter everyone in sight..." Xiongzhong trailed off, shaking his head. "I have heard of such a thing happening only once or twice in *history*..."

"Which is why it's almost definitely connected to the sabre spirit!" said Wei Ying, sounding very pleased with himself. "Really, what are the chances that Nie Su encounters a demon like that, and then *one* generation later his son qi deviates and then everything starts going wrong with the sabres and it's all a coincidence?"

"Okay," said Jinling suspiciously, "so why are we going to the creepy well?"

*“Because,”* said Wei Ying, “it might be related to where the demon came from, which would be good to know. If we can’t figure that out it’s not the end of the world, but it’s always easier to know what it is you’re dealing with. Ah, look! There it is!” Wei Ying pointed through the trees.

The well certainly was old. Wangji could see that before they even reached it – a large tree had fallen across it, but that to have happened at least a hundred years ago. A younger tree had grown up out of the broken stump, its branches overshadowing the dark stone of the well. There were also old wooden planks covering the well’s mouth, smothered in crawling plants.

Wei Ying squeezed Wangji’s hand meaningfully, and with great reluctance Wangji let go so that he could hop down off of Bichen.

“What’s supposed to be creepy about it?” demanded Jinling, landing beside Wei Ying and stalking closer to the well suspiciously. Jiang Wanyin reached out and grabbed him by the collar, dragging him back like a misbehaving puppy.

“Be careful!”

“Relax, Jiang Cheng,” said Wei Ying, grabbing a stick from the ground and poking at the well. “Fang Mei said there’s never been any trouble here.”

“So why are we here?” demanded Jinling, and Wei Ying frowned at him.

“Why are you so grumpy?” he said, before his expression changed. “A-Ling, if you’re worried about your father-”

“Who said I’m worried?” Jinling retorted, folding his arms across his chest.

Wangji was still learning how to read Jinling, who often seemed to say the opposite of what he meant, but he was rather certain that in this case, Jinling truly was worried about his father. It was quite reasonable, in Wangji’s opinion – Lanling was a snake’s nest of backbiting gentry at the best of times, and this was very far from the best of times. They had bid farewell to Zixuan and Mianmian that morning, and Jinling had been tight-lipped and brooding ever since.

“No one,” said Wei Ying, apparently deciding that the subject was better dropped. “In that case, help me get this lid off.”

Wangji stepped forward to help, too. It was a little tricky – the years seemed to have all but fused the wood to the stone, but eventually it gave, and there was a waft of stale air as the well was opened.

“Urgh,” muttered Jinling, stepping back, even as Wei Ying peered in.

“I thought so,” he murmured, seemingly to himself, and Wangji glanced in, too. Though the stone on the outside of the well was dark, on the inside it appeared stark black, but it was far from a natural hue.

“A scar,” he said aloud, and Wei Ying nodded.

“A long time ago, a huge lot of resentful energy escaped from here. There’s no trace of it now, so it’s been a while – my guess is this is where the demon came from.”

“There’s stone here that looks like an old lid,” said Huaisang from the other side of the well. “Da-ge, can you flip it over?”

For once, Nie Mingjue made no comment about Huaisang doing it himself, instead lifting and turning a rather big chunk of rock. He wiped away the mud caking its bottom and raised his eyebrows.

“It looks like there was a suppressing circle on here, once upon a time.”

Wei Ying nodded again. “So, my guess is someone threw someone or something down the well and forgot about them, probably close to the time the original village was flooded and abandoned. The energy was left to fester in the well until it cultivated almost to full consciousness, and then that tree fell and broke the suppressing circle,” said Wei Ying, pointing at the fallen tree.

“On its own?” asked Jiang Wanyin, raising his eyebrows, and Wei Ying shrugged.

“Perhaps, or a woodcutter. Or maybe a storm – we’re far enough from the village that it might’ve mostly passed them by, so they wouldn’t have thought it worth note when the killing started a few days later.” He clapped his hands together. “Right, time to check the bottom!”

Wangji looked up sharply, but before he could say a word, Jiang Wanyin snapped, “Absolutely not!”

Wei Ying sighed, turning to his brother. “Jiang Cheng, we need all the information we can get-”

“And you are in no state to go clambering down wells right now,” said Jiang Wanyin sharply. “No. You’re not doing it.”

“Are you a doctor, Jiang Cheng?” teased Wei Ying, but that was a mistake because Wen Qing, who had been hanging back from the well with her brother, stepped forward.

“Wei Wuxian, you are in no state to go clambering down wells right now,” she said, and he sighed.

“Fine. You’ll just have to do it then, Jiang Cheng,” he said, pulling out a coil of rope from his Qiankun sleeve and holding it out to his brother.

Jiang Wanyin glared at him with what looked like utmost loathing to Lan Wangji. Bristling, Wangji fought the urge to step forward – Wei Ying was still smiling, and did not look even a little bothered by the expression.

“You,” Jiang Wanyin snapped, snatching the rope and stalking to the edge of the well, “are the worst da-ge in the history of the world. I hate you so much.”



Wei Ying beamed. “I love you too, Jiang Cheng.”

“Yeah, yeah...”

Wangji tried very hard not to sigh. Long ago, he had (very easily) made peace with the fact that he would never understand Jiang Wanyin, but over the last few weeks he had thought that maybe he should. From the way that Wei Ying and Jiang Yanli smiled at the threats and declarations of disgust from their brother, he suspected that they really were Jiang Wanyin’s equivalents of endearments more often than not – a baffling and somewhat annoying concept to Wangji. But they *did* make Wei Ying smile, which meant that Wangji would tolerate it.

Besides, A-Yuan was already proclaiming his affection with a declaration of ‘I’ll break your legs’ – unfortunately, it looked like Jiang Wanyin’s contradictions were catching.

With the rope tied securely to a nearby tree, Jiang Wanyin climbed carefully over the edge of the well.

“If this ruins my robes, I’ll kill you,” he said.

“No you won’t,” said Wei Ying sombrely. “Think of how sad that would make all your nephews.”

Jiang Wanyin snorted. “They’d recover.”

A devilish light danced in Wei Ying’s eyes, and he lurched forward, his hands out to push his brother, but Jiang Wanyin’s own eyes widened just in time.

“Wei Wuxian!” he barked, leaping back from the wall and dropping down into the well. It was deep enough that the darkness seemed to swallow him before he reached the bottom, but Wangji heard a faint splash as he reached the water.

“Okay down there, Chengcheng?” called Wei Ying.

“Fuck you!”

Wei Ying snickered, looking immensely satisfied with himself. While Wangji could understand the gratification pushing Jiang Wanyin into a well must cause, he found himself very glad that he had so different a relationship with his own brother. Xichen had come to stand at his side, and the smile on his face told Wangji he was thinking along similar lines.

“I don’t think I would have survived childhood I’d spent it pushing you into wells and off piers, Wangji,” he teased, and Wangji let himself smile slightly.

“You would have survived. Murder is forbidden in Cloud Recess.”

Xichen’s smile grew, and Wangji took a second to study his brother’s face. Throughout the trial, Xichen had carried a tension that seemed to have lifted a little since, though Wangji could not say exactly when that was. Over the last two days, the only thing he had paid attention to was Wei Ying.

“There are bones down here,” called Jiang Wanyin grimly, and Wangji’s attention snapped back to the well. “Old bones. Lots of them.”

Wangji’s hand shifted to Bichen’s hilt. On their own, bones posed no more threat than a shadow, especially when there were no recent signs of resentful energy, but –

Beside him, Xichen shifted, his shoulder brushing against Wangji’s as he adjusted his sleeves. It was the same way he had comforted Wangji since they were children, a move so subtle not even the elders would notice it, but it had always been enough to ground him, and comfort him. Even now, Wangji felt a fraction of the tension leave him. Just a little.

“Bring them up,” said Wei Ying, his voice more sombre than before.

“I know that!” came Jiang Wanyin’s grumbling reply. There was the distant sound of splashing, and after a moment he called, “I’ve got them all, I think. As many as I can get, anyway.”

“Good. Are you too lazy to come up yourself? Do we have to pull you up?” Wei Ying called.

“Wei Wuxian!”

Wei Ying just laughed, but Jinling and Zizhen stepped forward, grabbing the rope and hauling Jiang Wanyin up. He was now carrying a large bag, presumably full of bones, based upon the odd shape of it. It wasn’t exactly a respectful way to treat the dead, but he supposed it couldn’t be worse than rotting at the bottom of the well.

“I don’t think I got them all,” said Jiang Wanyin gravely. “There were four skulls – one of them was small. There were shards at the bottom – I couldn’t tell if there were rocks or bones. But it’s better than nothing...”

Wei Ying nodded. “I doubt their spirits will still be here, but it’s worth a try. Lan Zhan, could you play inquiry?”

“Mn...” Wangji pulled out his guqin, settling down to play.

There was no reply.

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! I hope very much that you enjoyed this chapter, please do let me know if you have the time or the inclination to! Until next time, take care.

# Chapter 58

## Chapter Notes

Thank you so much to everyone who commented on the last chapter, and for your patience waiting for this one! I hope you enjoy it!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Well, that’s anticlimactic,” said Jinling, folding his arms over his chest. “Nothing happened.”

Unease crawled up Wangji’s spine as he stowed his qin. Yes, it seemed anticlimactic, but what was to say the danger was gone? What was to say something else wasn’t going to leap out of the woods while they were distracted, or lure them into a trap? It would be unwise to lower their guard. He rose to his feet.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Nie Huaisang grimace. “Would we say anticlimactic, or would we say ‘a convenient relief?’”

“It’s not convenient if it doesn’t solve any problems,” retorted Jinling, and Zizhen caught his eye, raising his eyebrows slightly. Sighing, Jinling rolled his eyes and looked away.

“You would be exactly right, A-Ling, if you weren’t also very wrong,” said Wei Ying, sounding a little smug. “If anything, this confirms my theory.” He paused, there, letting the word hang in the air with that little smirk on his face. Wangji had no intention of rising to the bait, not today, but apparently Jiang Wanyin had less patience.

“What theory, Wei Wuxian?” he asked, rolling his eyes.

“It’s not finished yet,” said Wei Ying, and Wen Qing raised her eyebrows.

“Wei Wuxian, we have all had a very long week, and would quite like to be back at Lotus Pier by now. Instead, we’re out in the middle of nowhere looking at a decrepit old well, and you are going to tell us why.”

Wei Ying pouted, slightly. “Wen Qing, you and Jiang Cheng sure know how to take the fun out of things.”

Wen Qing sent him a withering stare, and raised her arm. Wei Ying pulled a face at her.

“Fine!” His expression shifted, his eyes glinting as he prepared to weave his theory into a story. This may not have been when and where he wanted to share his ideas, but Wei Ying was still revelling in the attention. “If we take into account the bones in the well, along with the lid with the broken suppressing circle on it, and the scars of resentful energy on the walls,

*and* the fact that there was no one to reply to inquiry, the most likely explanation is that the demon came from this well. My guess is that the people were either murdered and thrown down there, or thrown down alive and left to die – either way, I think their deaths were violent and cruel. And their killer knew that, so they carved a suppressing circle into the lid of the well and sealed it, to get away with what they had done. Trapped in so small a space with so much resentment between them, they may well have come together to form a single, powerful demon, feeding on each other's rage and pain in an endless loop – until the tree broke the lid. Then, the demon escaped, and attacked Fang Village.”

“Okay,” said Jiang Wanyin slowly, “but how did Nie Su get rid of it? And how did that affect the sabres?”

“I don't think he did get rid of it,” said Wei Wuxian, his expression turning more sombre. “According to Fang Mei, by that point most of the Nie disciples were dead, and Nie-zongzhu himself was injured. He would have been desperate. I think, with no other options left, he tried to use its energy against it, to siphon off its resent and channel it through his sabre to reduce its strength. And I think it went very wrong.”

“How?” asked Nie Huaisang, fanning himself with a trembling hand and inching closer to his silent brother.

“This is the part I'm less sure of,” Wei Ying admitted, his brow pinched in thought. “But I think... my guess is that the demon fought back by attempting to possess the spirit of the sword, but that their strength was near matched... I think the spirit of Nie Su's sabre and the demon from the well fused together. I think the sword spirit is formed from the both of them, destructive and corruptive and bloodthirsty, but also bound to Qinghe Nie, and willing to lend its strength to the clan leader. It would explain why the first target was Nie Su's son, and why following that it laid havoc to the whole clan, but also why they were able to bind so strong a spirit to the seat of the master for so long. I think that's what it is – stronger than a normal sword spirit, stronger than a normal demon. But it's just a theory.”

Silence followed his words, shifting around the clearing as his meaning sunk in. Xiongzhang was the first to recover, shaking his head slightly.

“That sounds like a sound theory to me,” he said, glancing hopefully at Nie Mingjue. “Mingjue-xiong?”

“It doesn't sound impossible,” he said slowly, carefully. “How would you suggest fighting such an issue, Wei-gongzi?”

Wei Ying exhaled slowly, shaking his head. “I'm not sure about that yet.” He leant back against the well, shifting his weight back and swaying for a moment over the edge, and fear stabbed straight through Wangji's heart. “I think-” Wei Ying broke off, blinking at him in surprise. “Lan Zhan?”

Wangji didn't remember moving, but then again he had not thought to. He'd seen Wei Ying sit on the lip of the well, remembered the depth and the drop and the bones, and he'd grabbed Wei Ying's arm. But now everyone was looking at him, and Wei Ying looked confused, concerned.

“Do not fall,” he said quietly, and Wei Ying’s expression softened.

“I won’t,” he promised, holding three fingers up to his forehead, but Wangji didn’t let go of his other arm.

Xiongzhong cleared his throat. “We have time to think on and discuss strategy,” he said. “That doesn’t need to be done here or now, and besides, we cannot act on it until Weigongzi’s strength has returned. Perhaps for now it would be best to bury the bones as respectfully as we can. I doubt it will appease the demon now, but it is the least they deserve.”

“That sounds like a good plan,” said Wei Ying seriously. “But before we do I need to go pee. Lan Zhan, will you come with me, so Jiang Cheng doesn’t have a heart attack?”

“No fooling around, Wei Wuxian, I swear,” muttered Jiang Wanyin, but Wei Wuxian just rolled his eyes, leading Wangji a little way into the woods. When they were more or less out of earshot he turned around and met Wangji’s eye. Wangji’s stomach twisted painfully, fearfully – Wei Ying’s face was sombre, serious, and there was worry in his eyes.

“Lan Zhan,” he said softly, seriously, “what’s wrong? Are you hurt?”

Oh. He swallowed, glancing away, but Wei Ying took his arms and squeezed them. “Lan Zhan, look at me. Are you hurt?”

“No,” Wangji whispered, though the pain in his chest begged to differ. It was not *really* a lie – he doubted very much that the pain had a physical cause, and that was what Wei Ying was asking after.

“But you’re not okay,” insisted Wei Ying, and his hand moved from Wangji’s shoulder to his face. With a shudder, Wangji held it there, lowering his eyes, and Wei Ying’s voice softened. “Lan Zhan... You keep looking like you’re waiting for something to leap out and attack us, but... do you sense any resentful energy around here? At all? Because I don’t. There’s evidence of it being here, yes, but a *century* ago – there’s nothing left of it now. And I would know. I’m very in tune with these things.” Wangji winced, and Wei Ying’s voice grew even gentler. “If I thought there’d be any danger I would’ve waited, I promise...”

A lump rose in Wangji’s throat, and he opened his eyes. It wasn’t just that, not at all – it was, Wei Ying was – his eyes flickered to the bruise, and his lips parted, but it took him a long moment to force out the words. “It was just a trip to the library. No reason to think there would be danger there. But...”

Wei Ying sighed, as though he’d expected this. His arms came up around Wangji, one hand resting on his hair and guiding Wangji’s face to his shoulder. Another shudder ran down Wangji’s spine – he should be vigilant, should be alert, but the others were close, and it was true that he didn’t sense anything, and most of all now that Wei Ying’s arms were around him there was not a single part of him that could bear to break away. He hugged Wei Ying tightly, pressing his face into his shoulder, and Wei Ying’s hand stroked over the back of his hair.

"I can't say I'd be any better if it was you," he murmured. "That I felt any different after... I get it. But I'm okay, Lan Zhan. I really am. And I'm here. I love you."

"I love you," Wangji replied at once, holding tighter.

"It's okay," Wei Ying said softly. "It's okay..." he paused a moment, and then pulled back, reaching up to straighten Wangji's hair and knock a tear he hadn't noticed falling from his cheek. "We should probably get back before Jiang Cheng accuses us of any funny business. Or of slacking with the whole grave digging."

Wangji frowned. "Wen Qing has not cleared you for such activity."

Wei Ying laughed softly. "Okay. I'm not going to argue about it." He paused, and a faint blush appeared on his cheeks. "Ah, Lan Zhan... Your headband's crooked."

Something light stirred among the fear in his gut. "Can you fix it?"

Wei Ying smiled, a shy, wonderful smile, and reached up almost reverently. A thrill ran down Wangji's spine as gentle fingers brushed against his forehead, settling his ribbon, but it was far from the anxiety that had plagued him all day. With a sparkle in his eye, Wei Ying leant up onto his tiptoes and pressed a kiss to the cloud emblem in the centre of Wangji's ribbon.

"There," he whispered, eyes shining. "All better." Wangji swallowed, and Wei Ying smiled, taking his hand. "Come on. We really should go, before Jiang Cheng accuses me of besmirching your honour. If we're not lucky he'll assign us a chaperone."

Wangji couldn't help but scowl at that, an expression that drew a beautiful laugh from Wei Ying. Nevertheless, they returned to the others, and helped to bury the bones. They had no names to put to them, no idea who these people had been. One of the skulls was significantly smaller than the others, and Wangji prayed that the child had been dead before they were thrown down into the well, that they had been spared the horror of drowning in the dark.

When they had paid their respects, Wei Ying turned to Nie Mingjue and Nie Huaisang. "If it suits you, in a couple of months when Wen Qing's cleared me to cultivate again we'll come to Qinghe and form a proper plan."

Nie Mingjue bowed, lower than he needed to. "Thank you, Wei-gongzi. Please, do not rush yourself on our account. Qinghe Nie can wait until you are strong enough for such a trip."

At his side, Nie Huaisang looked unhappy, but he didn't contradict his brother. Lan Wangji thought he could understand. If it was Xichen, he would be loath to wait, too.

"In the meantime, I will continue to come to Qinghe to play cleansing for you," said Xichen, though his soft smile was aimed just as much at Huaisang as it was Mingjue. "We have time."

Nie Mingjue nodded. "Though speaking of time, if you want to reach Yunmeng by nightfall, you'd be best to go now. It's a long flight."

They said their farewells to the Nie brothers, Wei Ying giving Huaisang a tight hug before they left, and then they took to their swords once more, this time rising high above the trees,

and flying much faster than before.

Whether it was the act of flying, or simply growing further away from the village and the well, the tension in Wangji's stomach began to unravel as they flew back to Lotus Pier. Wei Ying was in his arms, safe and secure, and it was a clear day, so Wangji could see for miles in every direction – there was almost no chance of a threat sneaking up on them unnoticed.

And Wei Ying leant back against him, and wrapped his arms around Wangji's arms, and now and then whistled or hummed under his breath. His hands often found Wangji's, and he rubbed patterns into them with his thumbs or laid his palms against the back of Wangji's hands. He was there. Alive, warm, whole.

Safe.

Like this, it was so much easier to breathe.

By the time they reached Lotus Pier, the sun was dipping down towards dusk, and Wangji was starting to feel a little of the strain of the journey. For the last hour or so, they had slowed a little to match pace with Wen Qing, who had begun to lag the soonest. Even if she had not been travelling with her brother as an added weight, her cultivation was based more in medicine than swordplay, and indeed she had only borrowed the sword she rode recently from the Jiang. Her own sword had been lost during the war.

They landed in the courtyard, and just a few moments later there was a delighted shriek.

“A-Die! Baba!”

Wangji glanced up to see A-Yuan hurrying towards them, tugging Jiang Yanli along behind him. Laughing, she let go of his hand, and the little boy raced forwards, launching himself at Wei Ying, and Wangji's heart grew.

“A-Die!” A-Yuan cried again as Wei Ying picked him up, hugging him tightly and covering his little face with kisses.

“Hello A-Yuan,” he said between kisses, nuzzling A-Yuan's nose. “Have you been good little radish?”

Giggling, A-Yuan squirmed, leaning back, and then he froze, his little eyes widening.

“A-Die,” he said uncertainly. “Your – your head...”

“Oh, this?” Wei Ying said, pointing at the bruise. “It's nothing, little radish – I tripped over my own feet and fell into a door. But I'm okay.” He paused to plant a little kiss on the end of A-Yuan's nose. “I promise.”

“Oh,” said A-Yuan, the worry fading from his eyes. “Don't do it again, A-Die,” he chided gently, patting Wei Ying's hair with a gentle hand. “It looks really sore.”

“I will do my very best not to,” Wei Ying swore, and A-Yuan nodded solemnly. Then, with a look of great concentration, he wiggled in Wei Ying's arms and reached up to kiss the bruise

gently.

“Better?”

“Much better,” said Wei Ying, smiling, and A-Yuan grinned back, squeezing Wei Ying tightly. Then, to Wangji’s surprise, he reached out both hands to Wangji.

“Baba!” he cried happily, leaning away from Wei Ying, and by pure instinct Wangji caught him, surprise and warmth flooding through him as A-Yuan locked his legs and arms around him and squeezed him as tightly as he could manage. He hugged A-Yuan back, unable to keep a smile from his face. He’d expected A-Yuan to be pleased to see him, but Wei Ying had been his father for well over a year, in role if not in name, and Wangji had only been a permanent fixture in his life for a few months. He hadn’t expected A-Yuan to lean away from Wei Ying to reach for him.

“Hello, A-Yuan,” he said, and A-Yuan beamed, kissing his cheek.

“I missed you, Baba,” he said sincerely, tangling his fingers in Wangji’s hair the same way he would Wei Ying’s.

“I missed you, too,” he replied, kissing A-Yuan’s forehead. His son’s forehead. For some reason he couldn’t quite ascertain, he felt a little giddy. “But we are back now.”

“Back home,” A-Yuan agreed, nestling closer to him. “Baba and A-Die are home.”

A soft, almost inaudible sound caught Wangji’s attention, and he turned to look at his brother. There were tears in Xichen’s eyes, but his eyes were also shining, and his lips were curling into a small smile more sincere than any Wangji had seen from his brother in weeks. Smiling himself, Wangji nodded towards Xiongzhang.

“A-Yuan...”

A-Yuan followed his gaze, and then his face lit up. “Bobo!” He cried happily, but his arms remained secure around Wangji’s neck. “You came home too!”

Xichen inclined his head, smiling at A-Yuan warmly. “I came for a visit, yes.”

At once, A-Yuan’s grip on Wangji’s robes grew a little tight, and though there was no real worry in his voice he sounded suspicious when he asked, “A visit?”

“Yes,” said Xichen gently, using a tone Wangji had rarely heard in front of others – the one he’d always used to quash Wangji’s fears before they could even take hold. “This is your home, but it is not my home. My home is a place called Cloud Recess. Soon you and your fathers will have to come visit me there – it is where your Baba grew up.”

A-Yuan considered this carefully, and then he looked at Lan Wangji. “Cloud Recess is your home?”

Wangji paused – technically, Cloud Recess was his home, and he should not truly claim Lotus Pier as a home until he and Wei Ying were married, but that answer might upset A-



Yuan, who already had a small line of worry between his brows. “Yes, it is my home,” he said carefully, “but my home is also here. With you. When I visit Cloud Recess, you and Wei Ying can come with me.”

Satisfied, A-Yuan nodded, looking over the others. He frowned slightly. “Gufu and Nie-shushu aren’t here. Everyone, everyone else came home but they’re not here.”

“No, they’re at their own homes for a while, but they’ll visit soon enough,” said Wei Ying.

“Gufu and Nie-shushu don’t live at Lotus Pier?” asked A-Yuan, his eyes widening and his little brow creasing further. “Why not?”

“Because they have their own homes to go to, and jobs to do there,” explained Wei Ying. “Well, Zixuan has jobs to do. Nie-Xiong mainly has birds to look after.”

“Birds?” A-Yuan asked, and Wei Ying nodded, pinching his nose gently.

“Yep, many birds. When we go to visit Nie-shushu you can ask him to show you. Where are – oh, never mind, here they are.”

Wangji followed Wei Ying’s gaze and then smiled as Jingyi and Sizhui hurried into the courtyard. The former was still on one crutch, though he moved considerably faster now, and Sizhui was beaming ear to ear. His smile dulled, however, when he caught sight of Wei Ying’s face, and his step faltered.

“Xian-gege,” he said, and Wei Ying grinned at him.

“And there’s my Big Radish!” He cried, pulling Sizhui into a hug and ruffling his hair. Sizhui hugged him back, and tolerated the hair ruffling, and when he pulled back his eyes were dark with worry.

“Xian-gege, your face,” he murmured, and Wei Ying rolled his eyes.

“I’m fine! It’s just a little bruise, right A-Yuan?”

“A-Die fell over his feet and went splat on the floor,” said A-Yuan sombrely, but Sizhui caught Wangji’s eye, and Lan Wangji inclined his head slightly. He would explain later. Sizhui nodded back, and then he smiled again. Wei Ying pinched his cheeks, and then swept over to do the same to Jingyi, who spluttered a protest but could not escape, given the crowded courtyard and his crutch.

Wei Ying sighed happily. “It’s so good to be home.”

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Something was upsetting Jinling. Yanli could see it even as he jumped from his sword, could feel it as he bundled himself into her arms before he even said a word.

“A-Ling?” She murmured, but he shook his head into her shoulder, and then looked up.

“Alone,” he said in a small voice, “I, I need to talk to you alone. Please.”

“Of course.” She pressed a kiss to his forehead, studying his face carefully. “Are you hurt?”

“No,” he sniffed, running his sleeve across his face. He looked pale, almost sickly. “But, but I need to...”

“Okay,” she said, squeezing his hands. She turned to A-Cheng, who was watching them with a frown. “We were hoping you’d be back tonight, give us half an hour and dinner while be ready. Though do tell A-Xian that A-Yuan has already eaten and is almost ready for bed. If he wants to stay up with his fathers of course he can eat a little too, but that’s their choice. We’ll be back shortly.”

“Okay,” said Jiang Cheng, a confused frown furrowing his brow. So, he didn’t know what was wrong with Jinling either. That meant that if her son was ill or injured, he’d thought he had reason to hide it from his uncles.

Quietly, Yanli led A-Ling away, walking swiftly back to her rooms and shutting the door behind them. She led him down to the daybed and sat on the edge of it, coaxing him down beside her and taking his hands in hers.

“A-Ling,” she said gently, “what’s wrong?”

Jinling blinked furiously, staring down at their hands. He was breathing too quickly, too shallowly, and then he started shaking his head. “I don’t – it – it’s probably nothing, but – but-” He choked off, biting on his lip hard. She squeezed his hands.

“A-Ling...”

He drew in a sharp breath, and glanced up at her, but then he squeezed his eyes shut tightly and ducked his head. “A-Die took another woman to Jinlintai, and – and I don’t – Jiujiu and Xian-jiujiu said they knew her and nobody, nobody looked surprised, but I don’t, I don’t know who she is and if she – he – they-”

Surprised, Yanli blinked. “Do you mean Mianmian?”

Jinling nodded, wincing as he opened his eyes. “A-Niang, he, he wouldn’t... he wouldn’t... would he?”

It took her a moment to realise what he was talking about, and then she smiled, shaking her head a little. “No. He wouldn’t. Mianmian was A-Xuan’s shimei, until she ceded from the sect, and they were very good friends. But they have never been involved like *that*.”

Jinling’s cheeks were beginning to burn red, but to her dismay he didn’t seem any less upset. If anything, he looked worse – there were tears in his eyes, and his lower lip was trembling.

“A-Ling? What’s wrong?” she pressed gently, squeezing his hands, and he shuddered, looking down again. She paused, and then added, “If you don’t want to tell me, I understand.”

“No!” A-Ling choked again, shaking his head. “No, it’s - I don’t - I don’t think poorly of A-Die, I don’t want, I don’t want you to think I – that I think that of him, that I – I don’t – I

don't – To her dismay, Jinling began to gasp between words, wrenching little gasps that were almost sobs, and she wrapped her arms around him, pulling him close.

"I don't think that," she promised. "Neither does he."

"B-but it doesn't matter," he cried, curling into her embrace. "I don't - I don't want to doubt him, or to doubt you, but I - in Lanling they say, they say that men and women are never just friends and I know that Jiujiu and Xian-jiujiu would break A-Die's legs if they thought he was going to disrespect you and I know he wouldn't but - but I knew Xiao-shushu wouldn't hurt me too!"

And there it was, right at the end of the tumble of desperate words – the one thing Jinling needed to say. Yanli pulled him closer as her heart broke. Her son was so much like A-Cheng.

"I know, A-Ling," she whispered. "I'm so sorry."

He broke, bursting into tears and pressing his face into her shoulder and clinging onto her tightly, his entire body trembling. "I th-thought he loved me, A-Niang," he sobbed, and Yanli's heart shattered further, anger stinging hot and sharp among its broken pieces.

She hoped fervently, viciously, that wherever he was, Jin Guangyao was burning. But her anger would not heal A-Ling, not now, so she tucked it away and kissed his hair and held him close.

"I know it must be so difficult to believe anything of anyone, now," she murmured, "and I won't ask you to. But I love you, A-Ling. Nothing you ever do or say or think will make that less true, nothing you ever do will stop me from trying to protect you. I love you so much, A-Ling. So, so much. I'm here. And I'm sorry that I wasn't there before. But I'm here now. I'm here." Jinling sobbed again, shuddering, and she kissed him again, running her hand over his hair. "You've been so brave, and done so well. It's hard to remember, sometimes, all that you've been through, all that you're carrying. But you're not alone, A-Ling. You will *never* be alone."

His wail was muffled by her shoulder, but it was gut-wrenching all the same, and she felt her eyes sting. She rocked side to side a little, stroking his hair, letting him cry until his sobs came slower, and shallower. Until words began to emerge again.

"I'm... sorry..."

"Please don't be," she said at once, leaning back just enough to wipe the tears from his face with her sleeve and cup his cheek in her hand. "You have nothing to be sorry for. Nothing."

A-Ling's lip quivered, and he whispered, "Do... do you think he ever... do you think he ever loved me, A-Niang?"

Yanli felt tears well in her eyes, and she shook her head a little. "I don't know, A-Ling. I really don't." She was not sure whether it was better if Jin Guangyao had loved A-Ling or not – either way, he had betrayed him, and hurt him, and carved scars so deep into his soul... Either way, she knew she would never understand Jin Guangyao. "But I do know that you

were *always* loved. That the A-Cheng you knew loved you with all his heart, that A-Xian loved you in every life, from the moment you were born.”

Jinling gave a small, watery laugh. “He didn’t love me much when we first met in the woods.”

“First impressions are often wrong,” she said. “But I’m certain that the moment he knew who you were, Xianxian loved you with all his heart.”

To her surprise, Jinling’s eyes widened, and then he flinched, something that looked oddly like guilt flashing over his face.

“I – I –” he looked down, breathing quickly, and then he squeezed his eyes shut, bowing his head low. “A-Niang, I did something terrible! I’m sorry, I’m so sorry!”

“I believe you,” she promised, keeping her voice calm. “And I love you.”

“I stabbed Xian-jiujiu!” he cried, eyes still squeezed closed, and he cringed away from her as a gasp left her lips. Shock and grief and pain flooded over her in a wave as cold as winter waters, and she fought to keep her breathing steady. Jinling sobbed. “It was, it was when I found out who he was I – I didn’t know, I didn’t *understand*, I thought he’d – I’m sorry, A-Niang, I’m sorry, I’m sorry!”

He had thought A-Xian had killed A-Xuan. That he’d caused *her* death. She doubted anyone had ever told him otherwise, even A-Cheng. It was understandable.

It was *agonising*.

Yanli breathed out slowly, and then wrapped her arms around her son again. “I know you are.”

“I didn’t kill him!” A-Ling sobbed. “He – he was fine, b-but... but I - I know we said we’re not blaming people for things they haven’t done yet but I, I *did* do it! Xian-jiujiu doesn’t know, but I did, I hurt him, and – and –”

“A-Ling, breathe,” she murmured, pressing a kiss to his hair. “Breathe. I love you. A-Xian loves you. And if I know my brother, which I do, he loved you just as much after that as he did before.” She paused. “I think you should talk to him about it. Really. If it’s bothering you, you should speak to him. He will not be angry with you.”

“Are you?” Jinling whispered, and she smiled wearily.

“I’m not pleased,” she admitted, “but I understand, and I’m not angry.”

He sniffed, nestling closer to her, and she tucked his head under her chin. “I’m sorry.”

“I know.”

Jinling let out a long, shuddering breath, and his voice grew quieter. “I’m scared for A-Die.”

“Me too,” she admitted. “But he has Mianmian and Jin-furen to watch his back. I think you’ll like Mianmian, given the chance to know her.” She ran a hand over A-Ling’s hair, and prayed with all her heart the world would not prove her words wrong. “It’s alright, A-Ling. We’ll see your father soon.”

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! I hope that you enjoyed that chapter, and until next time please do take care!

## Chapter 59

### Chapter Notes

Thank you for all your lovely comments, and for your patience! I hope you enjoy this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Jinling sat alone in his mother's rooms, trying to focus on meditating. Trying, and failing miserably. Everyone else had gone to breakfast, but Jinling wasn't hungry. His stomach was twisted into a hundred knots, and not at all helped when his mother had asked him very quietly if he intended on talking to Wei Wuxian that day.

He wished, fervently, that he'd never told her. The look on her face when he said that he'd stabbed her beloved brother – every time he thought of it, her horror and sorrow twisted tighter and sharper into his chest. Jinling knew that his mother had already picked up on the... strained... relationship Jinling had had with Wei Wuxian before, but she hadn't needed to know, he shouldn't have told her –

He'd just been so upset.

It had just come out.

He never had learnt how to control what he was saying.

A-Niang had fussed, of course, when he said he wasn't going to breakfast, but she'd left soon enough when he promised to eat later.

He drew in a long, deep breath. Tried to focus.

There was a tiny knock on the door. It was quite possibly the quietest knock he'd ever heard, a few split-second raps of ghostly fingers against the door, and he frowned a little.

“Come in?”

For a moment, there was no response, and Jinling assumed he'd been hearing things. He was just about to close his eyes again when he saw the door inch open a little, and a little head with a pair of deep brown eyes peeked around the door. When they saw him, the eyes seemed to wince a little, brows furrowing low over them in what looked like worry.

“Uh... Can I help you?” Jinling asked awkwardly, and the head disappeared. Then, the door opened just a crack more, and a little girl slipped inside. At once, Jinling recognised her as A-Xia, one of the two little girls that had followed his father around like ducklings since he brought them back to Lotus Pier. Jinling knew that they were being fostered by their distant

cousins among the Wen, but it had always been A-Die they'd gravitated towards, so he'd spent a fair bit of time with them before leaving for the conference.

He wasn't sure he'd ever seen A-Xia without her sister before. Somehow, she seemed even littler on her own – she was hardly a few inches taller than A-Yuan, though if he remembered rightly she was six years old. As ever, she had her thumb in her mouth, but as she looked at Jinling made a small sound without moving her lips. It was a little like a hum, though shorter, and pitched more like a question. Then she tapped a finger to the centre of her forehead, and made the sound again, her eyes boring into him questioningly.

“Uh...” Jinling said again. “I don't know what that means.”

A-Xia pursed her lips, looking very worried, and then she made the questioning sound again, poking her finger into her forehead several more times. This time, she poked so hard there was a small red mark between her eyebrows when her finger fell away, and an idea hit him.

“Do you mean A – uh, Jin-shushu? Are you looking for Jin-shushu?”

A tiny smile tugged at the corner of A-Xia's lips, and she nodded.

“He's not here,” said Jinling regretfully, and A-Xia's eyes became very round and sad. “He's got some work to do in Lanling for a while.”

A-Xia hung her head dejectedly, chewing on her thumb as she stared at the floor, and Jinling felt bad for her.

He also felt more than a little awkward, but he did manage to add, “He'll be back though. I'm not sure when, but he'll visit soon.”

A-Xia glanced back up at him, and though she still didn't say a word, he got the distinct impression that she didn't believe him. At all. There was another soft little knock at the door, and Jinling called out again.

“Come in!”

He was completely unsurprised to see A-Xing slip inside the room, her eyes darting between A-Xia and Jinling. “Ling-gege,” she said, only a little shyly. “We're sorry. We were looking for Jin-shushu.”

“I know,” said Jinling, nodding towards A-Xia. “I was just saying that he's had to go back to Lanling, but he'll be back to visit. Soon, I hope.”

“Oh,” said A-Xing sadly, glancing at her sister. She didn't look surprised, but she *did* look upset, and she reached out to take A-Xia's hand. “We're sorry to bother you, Ling-gege. We'll go now.”

“Hang on a second!” he said, unable to take the look of dejection on their faces. “He *is* going to come back. He's just got things he has to do – he's Jin-zongzhu now, so he's busy, but he's definitely coming back.” He paused, and then thought to add, “And he'll want to see you two when he gets back, too.”

A-Xia glanced up at A-Xing, who *now* looked surprised. “He... he will?” A-Xing whispered, sounding disbelieving.

“Of course he will,” said Jinling, and A-Xing gave a small, shy smile. But both she and A-Xia now looked a little lost, a little hesitant, as though they weren’t sure what they were supposed to do now, and Jinling felt sorry for them. “Hey,” he said, as gently as he could, “we’re friends too, aren’t we? Why don’t you come in properly and tell me about your week? Did anything exciting happen when we were gone?”

The two girls hesitated for a moment, and then came over to sit beside him. “Not too exciting,” said A-Xing, sounding relieved about that. “But one day Er-shixiong came back from Lotus Pier with toys for *everyone*,” she said, in a tone of sheer wonder, “even all of us! I got a pinwheel *and* a doll, and A-Xia got a doll and a rattle-drum!”

“You did?” Jinling asked, unable to keep from grinning in the face of her enthusiasm. “That’s great!”

“Uh huh!” said A-Xing, nodded, and she patted her belt, where Jinling could see the face and arms of a little cloth doll poking over the top of it. A-Xia, he noticed, was also wearing her doll on her belt, and at her sister’s words the younger girl reached into her pocket and pulled out a rattle-drum, looking at Jinling.

“Show me,” he said, and A-Xia smiled, more widely than she had all morning. She spun the rattle drum between her palms, grinning at the sound it made, and Jinling felt his own grin grow. “I had one of those when I was little.” As a matter of fact, Jinling had had half a dozen rattle drums, and probably more toys than A-Xing and A-Xia had ever seen in their lives by the time he was three, but thinking of that just made Jinling feel guilty.

“I like them,” said A-Xing, nodding, “but I like pinwheels better, and Er-shixiong said I could have one, all for myself!” She paused, looking at Jinling. “Ling-gege, is this what it’s like all the time at Lotus Pier? You just... just have food and toys and clothes and you get to keep them?”

A lump rose in Jinling’s throat and he nodded, trying to keep his smile from slipping. “Yes,” he said firmly. “No one’s going to take your things away from you.”

A-Xing smiled warmly at him, and A-Xia tugged her sister’s sleeve, and then pointed from her belt to Jinling, before turning to look at Jinling herself with wide, hopeful eyes and a shy smile.

“A-Xia wants to know if you’d like to play with us,” said A-Xing, and Jinling felt something very warm in the centre of his chest.

“Okay,” he said, smiling and nodding. “Though I don’t have a doll.”

“You can borrow Lili,” said A-Xing happily, digging another little doll from her pocket. This one was unlike the neat, well-made little toys hanging from her and her sister’s belts – its head was a mishappen ball of twine, tied to a cross of two little sticks. A scrap of fabric had been tied around it like a dress with the same, dirty twine.



“I don’t know how to play dolls,” he admitted a little uncertainly as he took the offered doll. He’d had a couple of little soldier toys as a child, but he’d always been playing alone, so he wasn’t sure whether there were rules he was unaware of.

“Don’t worry, we’ll teach you,” said A-Xing sweetly, pulling her doll from her belt.

As it turned out, for the most part playing dolls with A-Xing and A-Xia meant re-enacting fairy-tales and happy little stories they seemed to have come up with themselves. To be honest, to Jinling the stories were painfully dull, but he knew that they weren’t for him, and there was something nice about listening to A-Xing’s happy chatter, and A-Xia’s little hums as she grew more comfortable. It was mainly his growing hunger that let him know how much time was passing, and he was just trying to figure out how to tell the pair that he needed to stop the game so he could eat something when there was a knock on the door.

It was a much louder knock than either of the girls’ had been, and they both jumped a little, but they didn’t look too alarmed. The door opened before Jinling could say anything, and – predictably – Wei Wuxian stepped inside. He blinked in surprise at the sight of the two girls, and then grinned.

“Oh, hello! I’m sorry, I didn’t realise A-Ling had company.”

“Hello, Da-shixiong,” said A-Xing, and A-Xia gave a little wave.

Wei Wuxian waved back, and then leant down a little, smiling, “Do you two mind if I steal A-Ling for a little bit?”

“No, Da-shixiong,” A-Xing said, standing up and pulling A-Xia to her feet too. Jinling passed back the doll, and the two little girls gave a couple of adorable bows, and then they scampered out. Wei Wuxian smiled at Jinling, sitting down casually beside him.

“So,” he said, meeting Jinling’s eye with a nonchalant smile. “You’ve been missing all morning. Shijie said you might want to talk to me?”

Jinling’s hunger vanished in an instant, replaced with roiling nausea. “No!”

Wei Wuxian blinked. “Oh?” he paused, frowning slightly. “A-Ling, is everything okay?”

Guilt gnawed even harder at Jinling’s gut as he remembered that awful, horrible night, as he remembered driving Suihua into his uncle’s gut. At that time, Wei Wuxian had never called him A-Ling. Jinling would’ve probably bitten his head off for it.

“I’m fine,” he said tightly, trying to stand up, but Wei Wuxian reached out and grabbed his wrist, firm but gentle.

“Hey,” he said, chiding slightly, his voice serious. “What’s wrong?”

Jinling didn’t like it when Wei Wuxian was serious. He was serious in so many of Jinling’s worst memories, he was serious when things were going wrong, or getting too real. Jinling was going to be sick.

“Okay, now you’re freaking me out, kid,” said Wei Wuxian, putting his other hand on Jinling’s shoulder. “You’ve gone white – are you going to pass out?”

“No,” Jinling muttered defensively, and Wei Wuxian squeezed his shoulder. Jinling’s heart twisted. He shouldn’t have told his mother, he shouldn’t have told *anyone*, he should’ve let his guilt eat him up and devour him from inside out forever.

“Okay,” Wei Wuxian said, his face creased with worry. “But A-Ling.. If you don’t want to talk about whatever it is, that’s fine. But can you promise me that you’re not hurt? That I don’t need to drag you to Wen Qing for her to stick you full of needles?”

“I’m not hurt,” Jinling swore quickly, and Wei Wuxian seemed to relax a little. The guilt in his gut writhed.

“Okay then,” said Wei Wuxian, leaning back slightly. “I understand not wanting to talk about things, even when Shijie thinks I should,” he gave a wry grin, winking at Jinling. “In that case you really should get something to-”

“I did something bad! Before, in the future!” Jinling blurted out as the guilt leapt up his throat. Wei Wuxian’s eyes widened, and Jinling squeezed his own eyes tightly shut.

“Oh...” said Wei Wuxian slowly. “Okay... what was it? Do you need help?”

*Do you need help?*

Jinling was trying to tell his uncle that he had *stabbed* him, and the first thought in Wei Wuxian’s mind was to ask if he needed help. Jinling felt tears burn beneath his closed eyelids. “I’m sorry, Xian-jiujiu. I’m so sorry! I – I – stabbed you!”

There was a long, lingering moment of silence, and Jinling couldn’t breathe. In the previous timeline, Wei Wuxian had seemed to forgive Jinling straight away, but the relationship they had was different now, he was Xian-jiujiu now, and if Jinling had broken it, if he had destroyed everything –

“You stabbed me?” Wei Wuxian sounded a little surprised, but less surprised than Jinling would have expected, and he didn’t sound nearly as upset as he should be.

Squeezing his eyes shut tighter and biting back a whimper, Jinling nodded.

“Where?” asked Wei Wuxian, and he *still* didn’t sound upset – he sounded curious.

Jinling opened his eyes cautiously. He thought he could see a little sadness in the furrow of Wei Wuxian’s brows, but it was curiosity sparkling in his eyes, and he was looking expectantly at Jinling.

“Jinlintai,” Jinling said slowly, and Wei Wuxian gave a wry smile.

“No, I mean where,” he said, gesturing up and down his body with his hand. “Where?”

Confusion and shame twisted together in his gut, and he shook his head slightly. He didn't understand why Wei Wuxian wasn't more upset, why he was so interested in knowing where Jinling had stabbed him, but he knew that he owed him the answer.

"Here," he said glumly, pointing on his own body, and inexplicably Wei Wuxian's eyes lit up.

"Here?" he cried, putting a hand over his hip right where Jinling's blade had sunk, and Jinling nodded, a lump in his throat – and Wei Wuxian laughed. "Ah, A-Ling... you really are a mini Jiang Cheng, through and through!"

"I... *what?*"

"Well, that's where Jiang Cheng stabbed me!" said Wei Wuxian, far too cheerfully. "When I was, uh, 'defecting from the sect,' I broke his arm for that."

Bewildered, Jinling shook his head. "He – Jiujiu *stabbed* you? There?"

"Yep," said Wei Wuxian. Slowly, his grin shrank a little, becoming more serious. "A-Ling... If it was at Jinlintai, I'm guessing it was just after you found out who I was, right?" A lump rose in Jinling's throat and he nodded, glancing down again. Wei Wuxian reached out and squeezed his hand. "It's okay, A-Ling, don't worry about it. I understand."

Jinling looked back up incredulously. "You understand?"

Wei Wuxian looked at him seriously. "If I was in your shoes, and had been taught all my life that the Yiling Patriarch was the man who'd murdered my parents, who'd slaughtered hundreds of other people besides, and I *then* found out he'd been acting as my friend for days... I probably would've struck in a much more fatal place."

Jinling frowned. His eyes were stinging. "But... but..."

Wei Wuxian slung an arm around his shoulders, tugging him close. "Don't worry about it, A-Ling. Really. I'm not hurt, and I doubt future me was all that surprised. It's okay."

"It's not," he protested, but he was unable to bring himself to push out of the embrace. "I hurt you, I just – I just stabbed you and –"

"And I know why you did," Wei Wuxian promised. "It's over now, A-Ling. I'm fine."

Unable to help himself, Jinling leant further into his uncle. "A-Niang's upset with me," he admitted, and Wei Wuxian winced.

"Ah, you told Shijie? She didn't like it all that much when Jiang Cheng stabbed me, either. She doesn't even like it when we spar, really. But it's okay, A-Ling. She's not going to hold it against you, or be unhappy with you for very long. Especially since I've never suffered from it – I am entirely unstabbed."

Despite himself, Jinling raised his eyebrows. "*Are* you entirely unstabbed? Because you just said Jiujiu stabbed you."

“Eh, that was years ago.” He squeezed Jinling’s shoulders. “Really, A-Ling. It’s fine. I promise.”

“If you’re sure,” Jinling added uncertainly. “Xian-jiujiu.”

Wei Wuxian beamed, the way he always did when Jinling called him Xian-jiujiu, pinching Jinling’s cheek. “Just, uh, don’t tell Lan Zhan, okay? I really don’t think he needs to know.”

Thinking of Hanguang Jun’s icy glare, Jinling completely and utterly agreed.

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For Wei Wuxian, the absolute highlight of the week following Jin Guangshan’s execution was watching Zewu Jun unknowingly compete with Jiang Cheng for the role of A-Yuan’s favourite uncle. Lan Xichen was clearly thrilled by the very concept of having a nephew, and seemed to be utterly besotted with A-Yuan. He’d brought him several gifts – though when he’d had time to find them between the investigation and the cultivation conference Wei Wuxian had no idea. There were toys and books, and an awful lot of candy, but without a doubt A-Yuan’s favourite was the little dizi that Xichen had brought him.

“It’s just like Chenqing, I’m just like A-Die!” he had cried, hugging the flute to his chest, and then flinging himself against Lan Xichen’s legs. “Thank you, thank you, thank you, Bobo! Can you teach me, can you teach me? Please?”

With Wei Wuxian’s blessing, Xichen had set to teaching A-Yuan how to blow the flute properly, and how the simplest of notes could be formed. Though clearly made for a child, the flute was beautiful, its colour an undeniably Lan shade of blue, adorned with silver butterflies. The craftsmanship was so fine that even the most piercing of A-Yuan’s enthusiastic notes were tolerable to hear.

A-Yuan adored the lessons with his Bobo, and he soon began trailing after him to beg for stories or for Xichen to play with him. Wen Qing commented on Zewu Jun’s apparently infinite patience, but Wei Wuxian could see it was more like indulgence – he *enjoyed* spending time with A-Yuan, and A-Yuan knew it.

Lan Xichen also made a point to spend time with Sizhui, and when A-Yuan saw how much his gege loved Lan Xichen his adoration seemed to grow even further. It was wonderful, utterly adorable, and, hilariously, was driving Jiang Cheng insane.

When Jiang Cheng handed over trinkets he’d ‘just happened’ to pick up on a ‘random’ trip to Caiyi, A-Yuan hugged his legs and thanked him, and then immediately ran to Xichen to show his Bobo his new treasures. So Jiang Cheng plied A-Yuan with candies, and told him funny stories about Wei Ying as a child, and A-Yuan laughed and laughed – and then ran back to Bobo to ask for stories about Baba. Lan Xichen, of course, obliged, apparently oblivious to Jiang Cheng’s growing ire as he told A-Yuan adorable stories about baby Lan Zhan. Things continued in this manner all week, until Jiang Cheng was positively grumpy, and quite clearly counting the hours until Lan Xichen left.

That was, until A-Yuan scampered up on the afternoon before Lan Xichen was due to leave, and tugged on Jiang Cheng’s sleeve while he was telling Wei Wuxian off for... something.

Wei Wuxian wasn't paying attention, since Jiang Cheng was clearly just venting – he thought it might have something to do with shamelessness. “Cheng-shushu, Cheng-shushu!”

“Yes, A-Yuan?” Jiang Cheng asked wearily. “What's Bobo given you now?”

“A song,” said A-Yuan proudly. “For Cheng-shushu.”

Jiang Cheng blinked down at his nephew, his eyes wide. “What?”

“I have a song for you,” A-Yuan said, raising his flute to his lips. The notes were a little sharper than they should have been, perhaps, and his little fingers were clumsy and slow as they sounded out the notes, but all the same A-Yuan managed to play the first few lines of a Yunmeng folk song, and Jiang Cheng beamed. When A-Yuan put down the flute, Jiang Cheng gave a cheer, and lifted A-Yuan up into his arms.

“That was wonderful!” he cried, nuzzling A-Yuan's nose. “Much better than your A-Die. And that song was for me?”

A-Yuan nodded. “For Cheng-shushu. Ling-gege says that the reason you've been so quiet is because you're grumpy, and A-Yuan wanted to help.”

Wei Ying snorted as annoyance flickered across Jiang Cheng's eyes, but his brother decided to settle on a smile, tweaking the end of A-Yuan's nose gently.

“Thank you,” he said. “I feel much better.”

“You should say thank you to Bobo too,” said A-Yuan sagely, and Wei Wuxian snickered into his sleeve as Jiang Cheng's eyebrows twitched, as though fighting not to descend into a scowl. “He taught me.”

“Sure, I'll thank Bobo,” Jiang Cheng muttered, and Wei Wuxian laughed. “Speaking of Bobo, A-Die and I need to go and see him now. You can come if you like, but it's going to be big grown-up talk and so it might be boring.”

“I'll come,” said A-Yuan, putting the end of his flute in his mouth and chewing it the same way he would Chenqing.

“Wait, what?” Wei Wuxian said in surprise. “Why are we going to see Zewu Jun?”

Jiang Cheng sent him a withering look. “Wei Wuxian, I was just telling you...”

“I wasn't listening.”

“Wei Wuxian-”

“That's not very nice, A-Die,” chided A-Yuan, frowning. “Bobo says when you don't listen to someone while they're talking to you that's like saying you don't like or reflect them.”

“Reflect?” Wei Wuxian smiled slightly. “Do you mean respect, A-Yuan?”

“Mn,” said A-Yuan, nodding. “You dis-resp-flected Cheng-shushu and that’s not nice. You should say sorry.”

“Huh,” said Jiang Cheng, smirking slightly, “maybe all that time with your Bobo was a good thing after all.” Wei Wuxian rolled his eyes, and Jiang Cheng shook his head slightly. “We need to discuss some details before Zewu Jun goes. About your wedding, and the arrangements afterwards – and about when Sizhui and Jingyi are going to ‘first’ go to Gusu.”

Wei Wuxian froze.

He hadn’t thought about – he hadn’t realised –

But of course. Sizhui and Jingyi were Lan, through and through, and soon Lan Liqin would officially claim them, and they’d go back to Gusu, and they would be fine because they’d have Lan Xichen to look after them, let alone Jingyi’s parents and grandparents, and they were pretty capable of taking care of themselves anyway, and Gusu wasn’t too far by sword so they could visit –

But Wei Wuxian wouldn’t get to see them every day. If he stayed at Lotus Pier, where he so achingly wanted to be, he would be apart from Sizhui most of the year, his son would be without both of his fathers, and it would all be because of Wei Wuxian’s selfish, stupid choices, and –

And –

“A-Die!”

Wei Wuxian flinched, looking at his son. A-Yuan was staring at him with concern, and Wei Wuxian made himself smile. “Ah, sorry, little radish, what were you saying?”

“I wasn’t, Cheng-shushu was,” said A-Yuan disapprovingly. “You deflected him again.”

Wei Wuxian gave a weak smile, rubbing the back of his neck. “Ah... sorry Jiang Cheng.”

Jiang Cheng rolled his eyes at him. “Calm down. We’ve got this.”

“We’ve got this, A-Die,” agreed A-Yuan, nodding, and Wei Wuxian made himself smile at his son.

“Of course we have, little radish.”

When they arrived at the meeting, Shijie, Lan Zhan, Lan Xichen, and Lan Qiren, who had arrived in Lotus Pier the day before, were already there. Tea had already been set out, and everyone else looked calm, even happy. Well, Lan Qiren didn’t look particularly happy, but then he never did when Wei Wuxian was in the room.

As the host, Jiang Cheng put A-Yuan down to greet the group, and A-Yuan latter immediately ran over to try and sit in both Lan Zhan and Lan Xichen’s laps at the same time. They weren’t quite close enough for him to manage at first, but then Xichen shifted closer to his brother, and A-Yuan leant back happily against their chests. Trying to keep any sign of his worry from

his face, Wei Wuxian moved to sit beside Lan Zhan, but Jiang Cheng cleared his throat, and Yanli took his arm. It was not a terrible place to sit, to be bundled between his siblings, so he didn't protest as they all settled down.

When the formalities were over, Lan Xichen smiled. "It's good to have something nice to be meeting about, for a change," he said fondly. "I think we can all agree that it would be best to hold the wedding sooner, rather than later."

Wei Wuxian certainly agreed with that. When they were married, he'd be able to boot A-Yuan, Sizhui and Jingyi out into their own bedrooms, and he and Lan Zhan would be able to enjoy a little privacy. Except he wouldn't have to boot Sizhui and Jingyi out, because they would no longer be here. His heart sunk like a stone.

"Furthermore," Zewu Jun continued, "Wangji and I have discussed how best to proceed with the formalities and technicalities after the wedding. My suggestion would be that you both remain members of your own clans, and honorary members of each other's. Similarly, A-Yuan and any other children you may have ought to choose a primary clan when they are old enough, but will always be considered an honorary member of the other. Wangji's expressed a desire to live here after the wedding, so that Wei-gongzi can continue in his duties to Yunmeng Jiang and to the Wen, and that seems quite alright to me. I would request that you reside at least a month of the year in Cloud Recess, and to ensure that you are not seen to be shirking in your duties to Gusu Lan, Wangji, I'd ask that you visit at minimum every two months."

"Would that really be alright?" Wei Wuxian asked in disbelief, unable to keep his eyes from moving nervously to Lan Qiren. Beside him, Yanli squeezed his hand.

The older man gave a long sigh, and fixed Wei Wuxian with a disapproving look. "There is no rule stating that to be a member of Gusu Lan, one must reside permanently in Cloud Recess, Wei-gongzi."

Wei Wuxian glanced at Lan Zhan, who gave him a small smile, and Wei Wuxian smiled back – and then thought of Sizhui and Jingyi again. He could visit every two months with Lan Zhan, could visit every month, but still...

Oblivious to Wei Wuxian's ongoing crisis, Lan Xichen beamed. "Wonderful! I believe the best way to go about things is for Wangji to return to Gusu with me tomorrow so that we may announce the engagement properly. Though it's a little unorthodox, I don't see anything inappropriate with his returning here the next day – he has a duty of care to A-Yuan, and it's quite probable that a longer separation would cause A-Yuan some distress."

"Bobo?" A-Yuan asked nervously, glancing up at him, but Zewu Jun gave a smile so warm and comforting even Wei Ying felt a little better.

"It's alright," he promised. "I need your Baba to come back to Gusu with me tomorrow, but you can stay here with your A-Die, and Baba will be back the very next day."

A-Yuan's eyes narrowed, and he looked between Lan Zhan and Lan Xichen. "The next day?"

“The very next day,” Lan Xichen swore, and A-Yuan let out a long sigh.

“Urgh... fine...” he muttered, slumping back against the Twin Jades.

“I’d also suggest that Sizhui and Jingyi come with us,” said Lan Xichen, and Wei Wuxian’s heart twisted. “It would be a good time for Liqin-qianbei to claim them – those who ignore the disciplines against gossip will likely be more distracted by the engagement. We can ensure they are inducted into the clan, that their names are written in the records and so on. Additionally, that way, if they wish, they can either stay in Cloud Recess, or return to Lotus Pier with Wangji.”

Wei Wuxian’s heart stopped beating.

*What?*

“How so?” asked Yanli, her head tilting to the side slightly, and Zewu Jun smiled at her.

“They’re supposed to be cousins of Yu Jinling, are they not? Or to have at least grown up with him. It would make sense that they have recently been at Lotus Pier, and are committed to assisting with the settling of the Wen. Normally, should one wish to be admitted into the Lan clan, one should study with the elders in Cloud Recess, but Wangji is their ‘cousin,’ and no one has ever questioned his integrity. He could tutor them. Moreover, the Council of the Elders will not protest, because they are aware of the boys’ origins and know that they already know all they should be taught.” He paused, considering. “In the autumn, we will be holding this year’s lectures. They should attend, as should Zizhen and Jinling. It would be good for them, and a good way to integrate back into the clan. But if, for now, Lotus Pier is more conducive to their healing or their happiness, that is fine with us. In the future, they are more than welcome to divide their time as they see fit. As Shufu said, there is no rule stating that every Lan must live permanently within Cloud Recess.”

As Zewu Jun spoke, Wei Wuxian looked at Lan Qiren in disbelief. The man wasn’t protesting or complaining, he wasn’t even pulling faces at the concept of bending the rules or forming exceptions. Catching Wei Wuxian’s glance, he cleared his throat, looking meaningfully at Lan Xichen, and Wei Wuxian held his breath.

Zewu Jun’s smile shifted, becoming a little harder, a little sharper – it was the smile he wore when he meant business, and Wei Wuxian felt like the ground was falling away beneath him –

“However,” Lan Xichen said, his voice deceptively pleasant, “I think it *only* fair, if their predominant residence is to be Lotus Pier, that Cloud Recess should host the wedding.”

“I understand the merit of that,” said Yanli carefully, “but I have been planning my brothers’ weddings for many years, Zewu Jun.”

“Of course, I would welcome any and all input from you, Jin-xiao-furen,” said Lan Xichen almost eagerly, and Wei Wuxian almost laughed. “But it will be held at Gusu.”

“Very well,” said Yanli, inclining her head, and Wei Wuxian blinked.



“Hey, don’t I get any say in this?”

“No,” said Shijie and Jiang Cheng in unison, and Wei Wuxian rolled his eyes.

“If you agree, Jin-xiao-furen, I was thinking that the wedding could be held at the end of next month,” said Lan Xichen, and Wei Wuxian held up a hand.

“Wait a second,” he said, and he felt half the room tense at the seriousness of his voice.

“What about the Nie problem? Shouldn’t we wait until that’s sorted?”

“I do not see why,” said Lan Xichen, a light frown on his face. “Wen-guniang said she estimates it will be six months or so before you will be fully prepared for a mission of such magnitude, and having a wedding within that time will not mean Da-ge will have to wait longer.”

Wei Wuxian shifted uncomfortably. “Isn’t it... to be celebrating when they’re...”

“In a better position than they have been for centuries?” asked Lan Xichen quietly. “Weigongzi, up until now, Mingjue-xiong has never had reason to believe he would survive the sabre spirit. For now, he is well. Believe me – neither he nor Huaisang would begrudge you this.”

“Okay,” said Wei Wuxian slowly, “but what about Lanling? It’s bound to still be a mess in a month and a half – what if the Peacock can’t come and then Shijie won’t come and-”

“A-Xian,” said Yanli gently, putting a hand on his arm. “There is nothing that will stop me from coming to your wedding. Hopefully, A-Xuan will be able to attend, too, but if not we shall celebrate with him later.”

“Okay, okay,” Wei Wuxian said, but his panic was rising and when he looked at Lan Zhan Lan Zhan looked *concerned* and –

“Xianxian,” said Yanli, smiling fondly at him, “it *is* okay. You’re allowed to have nice things. You deserve to have nice things. And everyone feels a little flustered when they start planning a wedding – it’s perfectly normal.”

Is that what it was? Was he really just flustered? It had been so long since he’d been *flustered*, since there hadn’t been fear or grief behind his nerves. He looked at Lan Zhan, at A-Yuan, and he gave a shaky smile.

“Okay, then,” he said, “Let’s get married.”

I hope you enjoyed this chapter! Please do let me know any thoughts you had, I love hearing what you think! Until next time, please take care.

# Chapter 60

## Chapter Notes

I'm so sorry about the long wait for this one - the chapter was difficult to write, and I was a little under the weather health wise (nothing to worry about, I'm fine now!) so it took a while but we're here now. Thank you for all your lovely feedback for the last chapter!

DISCLAIMER: I've done my absolute best to make the wedding seem culturally appropriate, but it's difficult given how steeply gender roles are ingrained into every aspect of Chinese weddings, and as much research as I've done for this chapter it's not my area of expertise. As such, this chapter will not be historically accurate. If there's anything egregiously offensive about it please do let me know!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Personally, Wei Wuxian was more than happy to have his wedding in Gusu. He would marry Lan Zhan anywhere, and he was still reeling in blissful surprise that he would be able to. Yanli seemed happy enough for Gusu Lan to host the wedding too, after Lan Xichen's assurances that she would have an input on the planning, and Jiang Cheng declared that he was glad he wouldn't have to clean up, and that there wouldn't be any problems as long as Gusu Lan didn't treat Wei Wuxian like a bride.

When Wei Wuxian teased his brother and said that he thought he'd make a beautiful bride, thank you very much, Jiang Cheng had looked at him with surprising seriousness.

"If people think you're taking the role of the bride, they'll think you're leaving Yunmeng Jiang. Having the wedding in Gusu already carries the implication – I'll not let them do anything else to back it up."

A huge swell of fondness had rose in Wei Wuxian's heart at the words, which he had demonstrated by pinching his brother's cheeks and driving him backwards into a lotus pond. Personally, he didn't care if people thought he was a bride, or taking the role of one. He knew better, and Lan Zhan knew better, and their families knew better, and that was all that mattered. He'd certainly been thought of as far worse things. But he understood Jiang Cheng's perspective, and so he let him grumble and fuss until he was sure that there could be no misunderstandings. Then, Jiang Cheng was happy enough about the setting of the wedding.

The rest of Yunmeng Jiang however, were not. Much to Wei Wuxian's surprise, as soon as it was announced that he would be getting married away from Lotus Pier, what seemed like the entirety of the Yunmeng Jiang clan began arguing about who was going to be allowed to go.

It soon became clear that no one wanted to stay behind.

The older disciples argued amongst themselves about seniority and rank, and having known Da-shixiong longer, and the littlest of the shidi and shimei put forth a solid argument at their never having travelled before. Everyone in between seemed to have a list of reasons as long as their arms why they should be allowed to go in place of the disciple beside them.

“There will be a banquet here too, afterwards,” Jianyu pointed out gallantly as Wei Wuxian spied on one argument from around the corner. “Zongzhu can’t take everyone.”

No one seemed to care about that.

“It’s not fair that all of the Wen get invited but we can’t all go,” said Huang Liuyang. “We were his family first, we should get to go, too.”

Jianyu raised his eyebrows. “Are you saying they shouldn’t all get to go?”

Liuyang stared at him as though he’d suggested she throw herself into a pile of horse dung, though she managed not to sound too disrespectful as she said, “No, Er-shixiong, obviously not. I’m saying we should get to go *too*, and it’s not fair that we can’t!”

“Uh huh,” said Jianyu. “And you think we should just leave Lotus Pier entirely empty?”

“Well, no,” she admitted, “but it’s not fair!”

“Life isn’t fair, Shimei. Why are you so convinced you’re not going, anyway?”

“Because my father *volunteered* to stay,” she said mutinously. Wei Wuxian wasn’t entirely surprised about that, and he didn’t think that Huang Liuyang should be either – Huang Fan had lost a leg in the war against the Wen, and had avoided extensive travel ever since.

“Right, right,” said Jianyu, folding his arms across his chest. “And at thirteen you’re clearly far too young to travel with the rest of the clan without your father. It’s not like you’re even old enough have your own sword or anything.”

The girl blinked, staring down at the sword in her hand as if she had forgotten about it, and then looking back at Jianyu suspiciously. “Er-shixiong, are you saying I can go even if A-Die doesn’t?”

Jianyu shrugged. “If Zongzhu, Da-shixiong, and your father are all happy for you to go I don’t see why you can’t. But it’s not my decision – Da-shixiong will decide who he wants to come with him.”

*Da-shixiong will not*, Wei Wuxian thought with growing horror as the disciples began an intense argument about who Da-shixiong liked best, and who liked *him* best, and who he would be most upset to see not attending his wedding.

In that moment, Wei Wuxian decided that Jiang Cheng could be in charge of deciding who was going and who wasn’t. If anyone was upset by it, they could take it up with him, and Wei Wuxian wouldn’t have to deal with their disappointment.

He could hardly believe it, though, how vehemently the disciples were arguing their case. It was a loud, obnoxious outpouring of affection that Wei Wuxian wouldn't have blinked at before the war, because he'd known that he was liked, and that his clan cared for him, but he'd never realised – he hadn't understood...

He hadn't understood how deeply they really loved him, how much the love he held for them was returned. And he'd never thought their affection would really be the same after the war, after they'd seen him cultivate with resentful energy, after they'd seen him create the Stygian Tiger Amulet, after they'd seen him leave them for people of the same clan that tore all their lives apart.

But the affection was still there, and he was starting to understand that it was deeper than affection – that it was love. That his clan loved him.

It was overwhelming.

“A-Die!” A-Yuan cried, smacking into his legs from behind, and Wei Wuxian grinned, reaching down to sweep his son up into his arms. This, too, was a love far bigger than he could cope with, but here he had more practise accepting it.

“Hello, A-Yuan! I thought you were practising your writing with Sishu?” he said, glancing at the older man, who was following A-Yuan over.

“I'm finished,” said A-Yuan, looking at him sombrely. “I wanted to see you.”

Wei Wuxian felt a sinking feeling in his stomach, and he smiled slightly. Lan Zhan and Xichen had left for Gusu that morning, and though Lan Zhan was due back tomorrow evening, that seemed to be a lifetime away. “I'm here,” he promised. “I'm not going anywhere, and Baba will be back soon.”

“I know,” said A-Yuan seriously. “I just wanted to check.”

Wei Wuxian smiled sadly, hugging his son a little closer. A-Yuan was clingy for the rest of the day, and come bedtime, when Wei Wuxian tried to tuck him in, A-Yuan looked around the empty room with wide, lonely eyes and a trembling lip. Sniffing, he held out his arms, and all Wei Wuxian could do was pick his son up and carry him to his own bed.

“You can sleep with me tonight, okay?” he murmured, and A-Yuan nestled close, and did not let go until morning.

As comforting as it was to have his son so close, the toddler was rather wiggly in his sleep, and Wei Wuxian did not sleep well that night. The next day he was grumpy and glum, until the sun began to set, and his three Lan returned.

To Wei Wuxian's amazement, Lan Zhan, Sizhui, and Jingyi came back with a ridiculous amount of betrothal gifts between them – and they seemed utterly unfazed by it.

“It's no more than Jiang Cheng sent us away with,” said Sizhui reasonably as Wei Wuxian gaped. Since neither Wei Wuxian nor Lan Zhan were brides, he'd assumed that there would

be less in the way of betrothal gifts and dowries, but apparently Yunmeng Jiang and Gusu Lan had decided to send ridiculously expensive and ostentatious gifts to each other anyway. Wei Wuxian tried to point out to Lan Zhan that such clear materialism was against the rules, but Lan Zhan just smiled softly at the pile of gifts.

“Xiongzhong is fond,” he said, looking at Wei Wuxian with so much love in his eyes that Wei Wuxian almost collapsed on the spot. “Wei Ying is worth it.”

Wei Ying was not entirely sure that he was. The Jiang finances couldn’t be in the best position given the war and the rebuilding and the sudden influx of mouths to feed, but Jiang Cheng seemed to be sparing no expense in the preparations. Soon, Lotus Pier was full of carriages being prepared for the journey to Gusu, decorated in red and gold, and the stables were full of fine, strong horses, and already the kitchens were stocking up in preparation for the feast they would hold on their return, and the cost of it all had to be immense. When he found out that Jiang Cheng had personally commissioned Wei Wuxian’s wedding robes from the best – and most expensive – tailor within fifty miles, his worry grew, until he couldn’t take it anymore.

Of course, talking to Jiang Cheng about it would likely just start an argument, so he went to their sister instead.

“A-Xian,” she said, frowning slightly. “You look worried... what’s wrong?”

“Ah, Shijie, it’s not... it’s not anything dangerous,” he said, and her frown deepened. She led him to sit down, and then handed him a squirming Rulan. Despite himself, Wei Wuxian felt some of the tension in his stomach loosen as he looked down at the baby, kicking and babbling happily in his arms.

“Just because it’s not dangerous doesn’t mean it’s not upsetting you.”

“No, it doesn’t.” Wei Wuxian sighed, and then took a deep breath. “Shijie, I’m worried that Jiang Cheng’s spending too much money on the wedding. It’s not – I know Lan Zhan deserves the best wedding in the world, and I know that Gusu Lan are paying for everything on their end, but the carriages, the horses, the engagement gifts – can we really afford all of it?”

The worry on Yanli’s face smoothed away, leaving a fond – if exasperated – smile on her face. “Xianxian, do you really think A-Cheng would bankrupt the clan?”

“I mean maybe,” said Wei Wuxian defensively, glancing down at Rulan, who was sucking on lock of his hair. Grimacing, Wei Wuxian extracted his hair from the baby’s mouth and tucked it over his shoulder, and Rulan gave a yowl of protest. In truth, for all his expensive taste in clothes Jiang Cheng wasn’t terrible with money, and he had been nothing but responsible in the role of Jiang-zongzhu so far but... “I guess... I just spent so much of the last two years... I couldn’t even afford to buy A-Yuan a paper butterfly. We had to haggle for everything, we... I suppose I’m just not used to it anymore.”

“Xianxian,” Yanli murmured, putting a hand on his arm, and he winced. He’d never wanted Shijie to know how dire the Burial Mounds had been, but she had seen them, now, and seen

A-Yuan's wonder at the free-flowing food and toys at Lotus Pier, and he wasn't naïve enough to think she hadn't figured out much of it herself. But he still would rather she didn't know. "I know it's a big change, and a big shock. But A-Cheng knows what he is doing." She paused, smiling slightly and lowering her voice. "Truthfully, Yunmeng Jiang has not paid for everything. Several of the carriages and horses are on loan from merchants in Lotus Cove, as a wedding gift to you. There are so many people here who love you, Xianxian."

He felt his eyes sting, but he tried to smile at her all the same. "I – I know..." *I just don't know that I deserve it*, he added silently. Yanli, however, knew him better than anyone, and her smile grew sadder. She pressed a palm to the side of his cheek.

"Xianxian," she said softly, seriously, "you deserve no less than this. What I would love, more than anything, is for you to believe that. But if you can't..." she paused, and then cupped his face in both her hands. "If you can't, A-Xian, then at least believe that this is what you are worth to *us*. That this is how we can show how much we love you."

"Shijie," he whispered, feeling a tear slip down his cheek, and she wiped it away gently.

"A-Xian," she replied, smiling so warmly at him his worry could hardly survive it. "I mean it. Don't dwell on thinking you don't deserve this. Because even if you didn't, which you do, we would do the same. Because this is how much we love you."

A lump rose in Wei Wuxian's throat, and he leant forward, pressing his face into his sister's shoulder. "Shijie... I want to put my head in your lap, but I'll squash the baby."

She laughed, bringing her arms up to hold him. "It's alright," she said. "I can still stroke your hair right here."

He smiled, closing his eyes for a moment. The lump in his throat grew bigger. "Shijie?"

"Mn?"

"I'm sorry I missed your wedding. I'm so sorry."

"Oh, A-Xian, I know," she murmured, pressing a kiss to his hair. "Of course I know. But you don't need to be sorry – I know how much of a sacrifice it was for you, and I know why you did it. My Xianxian is so good." She paused, and when she spoke again he could hear the smile in her voice. "If there's anything you want for your wedding, tell me. Otherwise, let A-Cheng and I handle it – we'll make sure it's as wonderful as you deserve it to be. I promise, we won't bankrupt the clan."

Wei Wuxian laughed, sitting up. "Shijie, you know 'as wonderful as I deserve' could mean it shouldn't be wonderful at all."

She tried to scowl at him, but even in jest it wasn't very effective. "A-Xian..."

He laughed, and her scowl broke into a smile.

For the most part, with Shijie's assurance that they wouldn't go overboard, Wei Wuxian was content to let his siblings take charge of the planning and preparation. There were a few

exceptions – most notably when Jiang Cheng tried to insist that Lan Zhan not travel with them to Gusu, saying that people would see it as him taking Wei Wuxian back as a bride.

It would be all well and good if they were flying, but with over half of the Jiang Clan and nearly three quarters of the Wen due to travel with them there were too many children and non-cultivators to take such a journey by sword. Therefore, the journey would take at least a week, which was far too long to be apart from Lan Zhan, even if he was on his way to their wedding. Wei Wuxian had argued, and Shijie had cajoled, and, most effectively, A-Yuan had stared up at Cheng-shushu with his bottom lip wobbling and asked why he wanted to send Baba away. Then, finally, Jiang Cheng agreed that Lan Zhan could come with them, as long as on the morning of the actual wedding Lan Zhan and Wei Wuxian would arrive separately to the ceremony.

“It’s not like a week apart would’ve killed you,” Jiang Cheng had muttered, but he’d also dropped the issue, and diverted his attention to the travel arrangements instead.

The final days before they left for Gusu passed in a wild blur of packing and preparation that Wei Wuxian tried to avoid for the sake of his own sanity. Yanli and Jiang Cheng were scarily efficient, and the rest of the clan were running around to set things in order, and there were excited (and somewhat terrified) butterflies crawling around in Wei Wuxian’s stomach the entire time.

It was still a little hard to tell what was wedding jitters and what was genuine fear. Worries scurried around Wei Wuxian’s mind like burrowing insects – what if someone thought to attack the Wen while they were on the way? It was true that the Jiang Clan would probably swiftly and angrily clamp down any threat, but what if they couldn’t? Or what if they did, and it upset A-Yuan anyway? What if all of the wheels fell off all of the carriages and they were so late to Gusu that they missed the wedding? What if rebels in the Jin sect attacked at the wedding? What if there was no alcohol at all?

But when the worries grew too much, he would whisper them to Lan Zhan at night, and Lan Zhan would hold him close and murmur gentle promises back.

No one had the strength to take on the entire Jiang Clan – the Wen would be as safe on the road as they would be at Lotus Pier. Lan Zhan would never let anyone scare A-Yuan. If the wheels somehow fell off all the carriages, it wouldn’t take too long to put them back on, and if they *were* late it was not as though Gusu Lan could start without them. Jin Zixuan said that the work in Lanling was going well, and even if it was not, no one would get into Cloud Recess without an invitation – anyone who tried to start a fight at the wedding would be taken care of by the Lan or the Jiang or the Nie before they could get to Wei Wuxian or the Wens. Weddings were an exception to the ‘no alcohol in Cloud Recess’ rule – most of the Lan would still not drink, but there would be plenty of alcohol for the guests.

“Emperor’s Smile,” he murmured into Wei Wuxian’s ear, sending a wonderful shiver down his spine. “I promise.”

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When they were children, Xiongzhong had often spoken about his dreams for his wedding, and his dreams for Wangji’s. Now, of course, Wangji recognised that his brother’s childish



daydreams likely came from what he so desperately wanted, from what he saw their parents clearly didn't have. He understood that Xichen had imagined a happy wedding would lead to a happy life, that if he married a woman who loved him back he would not have to lock himself away forever.

As a child, however, Wangji had never understood why Xichen went on so much about weddings and marriages, especially when he kept talking about the women that they would marry. Even when he was small, Wangji had known he did not want to marry a woman. When he told Xichen this, his brother had effortlessly started describing Wangji's groom instead, but still Wangji found it very, very difficult to be interested in Xichen's stories and daydreams. He couldn't imagine why anyone would want to get married at all, and it seemed a very mundane thing to be thinking about. If he was going to imagine his future, he'd rather think about the things he could achieve, about how good a cultivator he could become, about how proud he could make his clan.

Even as a teenager, he had grown exasperated on occasion with Xichen's romantic hopes for their lives, but now...

Now, Wangji could not be more grateful. Because Xichen knew him, in and out and heart and soul, and in just over a month he managed to plan a wedding that was as perfect as Wangji could imagine a wedding to be, a wedding that was everything he never realised that he wanted.

The decorations were exquisite, and Cloud Recess was adorned with more red than Wangji had ever seen, and yet it was not excessive or ostentatious. It was tasteful and delicate and beautiful, and everything was perfect. On the day of the wedding, despite the anticipation buzzing in the air things were remarkably calm, and somehow Xichen had made the ceremony itself more private than Wangji had thought possible.

He had known all along that the wedding would be a big event – as the brothers of clan leaders, it was a political affair that no one wanted to miss, and as such representatives from almost every clan had been invited (notably excluding Baling Ouyang and Pingyang Yao) not to mention the vast number of people they'd brought with them from Lotus Pier. Furthermore, the news that Hanguang Jun and the Yiling Patriarch were on their way to Gusu to get married had spread fast, and by the time they had reached Cloud Recess their group had nearly doubled in size with all the hangers-on, but Xichen had politely insisted that only those with invitations be allowed in.

And for the actual ceremony, there were less than thirty people present.

Now, Shufu, Xiongzhong, Sizhui, Jingyi, and Jingyi's family stood for the Lan clan, along with a couple of other elders that Wangji had always been fond of. On the Jiang side were Jiang Yanli, Jiang Wanyin, Jinling and Zizhen, along with Jin Zixuan and baby Rulan. Beside them were Wen Qing, Wen Ning, Sishu, and Popo, who was holding one of A-Yuan's hands. His son's other hand was holding Nie Mingjue's, a sight Wangji could not help but smile at. A-Yuan had been a little intimidated by his Nie-bobo when they met again yesterday, but to the surprise of many Nie Mingjue had a soft spot for children. Wangji was not surprised. He had known Nie Mingjue since he was a child himself. The final guest allowed in the shrine

was Nie Huaisang, who seemed to have bought a new fan for the occasion, and had been grinning since he got to Cloud Recess.

And of course, most importantly, at Wangji's side was Wei Ying, breathtakingly beautiful in robes of red and gold, embroidered with lotus flowers and also with clouds in the style of Gusu Lan, and Wangji's heart was so full he could hardly breathe.

Tears sparkling in his eyes, Wei Ying beamed through the bows, and Wangji couldn't keep the smile from his own face, either. They bowed to their families, to heaven and to earth and to their ancestors, and they bowed to each other, and Lan Wangji was certain he'd never been happier in his whole life. When he wrapped his headband around Wei Ying's wrist, linking their hands together, Wei Ying laughed.

"We've done this part before," he teased, and there was nothing in the world that could stop Wangji from leaning forward and kissing him. It wasn't exactly traditional, nor strictly appropriate, but not even Shufu complained.

After the tea had been served and drunk, and the ceremony was complete, Sizhui stepped forward, throwing his arms around Wei Ying and Wangji and hugging so tightly it almost hurt.

"I'm so happy for you," he said, his voice slightly choked, but he was also beaming, and Wangji returned the embrace whole-heartedly.

"It's all thanks to you, A-Zhui," said Wei Ying. "If you knew how to make a silencing talisman properly we would not be here."

Sizhui's face burnt as red as the wedding robes, and a ripple of laughter ran over the room. Jiang Yanli was the next to swoop forward, hugging Wei Ying tightly and then kissing his cheeks. Then she pulled back, and smiled at Lan Wangji.

"Congratulations, Hanguang Jun," she said. "Forgive me, I don't want to make you uncomfortable, but if I may, I would love to give you a hug..."

Though he felt a little uncertain, Wangji nodded and opened his arms, and Jiang Yanli stood on her tiptoes to embrace him. It felt surprisingly comfortable, and before she pulled away she murmured, "Thank you, for loving our Xianxian as much as you do."

He could not help but smile back. "No need for thanks." He paused, and then said, "If you like, you may call me Wangji."

Jiang Yanli beamed. "I would like that very much." She hesitated, and then nodded. "Between A-Xian and I, 'Shijie's meaning is closer to Jiejie than anything else... If you like, you're more than welcome to call me Shijie, too."

At his side, Wei Ying gave a little squeak, and Wangji smiled, bowing his head. "Thank you, Shijie."

"I can't!" Wei Ying gasped, clutching his heart dramatically. "My heart can't take it."

“Oh, shut up,” said Jiang Wanyin, rolling his eyes and shoving Wei Ying’s shoulder. Then, as if as an afterthought, he threw his arms around his brother and added, “Congratulations.”

Unlike his sister, when he pulled away from Wei Ying, Jiang Wanyin made no attempt to hug Wangji, but he did smile at him, more warmly than usual.

“Welcome to the family,” he said, sounding entirely sincere, and Wangji inclined his head.

“Thank you. If you want, you may also call me Wangji,” he said, Jiang Wanyin nodded, still smiling.

“In that case you may as well just call me Jiang Cheng. Everyone in our generation does,” he said, swatting Zizhen on the arm. “Even these disrespectful nephews of mine.”

Normally, such a thing would be far too informal for Wangji’s taste, but he had noticed that few people their age addressed Jiang Wanyin as such, so he inclined his head, and Wei Ying gave a happy sigh.

“If Wangji is to address your siblings as you do, you are most welcome to call me Xiongzhong, if it is what you wish,” said Xichen to Wei Ying, and somehow, inexplicably, Wangji’s happiness grew even stronger.

“Thank you, Xiongzhong,” Wei Ying said, bowing, and Xiongzhong beamed back.

“Good luck with that, Zewu Jun,” said Jiang Cheng in a playful warning. “I doubt he’ll be any easier to handle as a little brother than he is as a big one.”

“I will accept that challenge wholeheartedly,” said Xiongzhong, the solemnity of his tone belied by the sparkle of his eyes, and he stepped forward to embrace Wangji, and then Wei Ying.

With the exceptions of Shufu, the Lan elders, and Nie Mingjue, Wei Ying ended up hugging everyone in the room, and Wangji accepted their well wishes with a fond smile, a little relieved that they didn’t all try to hug him, too. He didn’t think he would ever be so tactile as his husband – his *husband!* – but from the smiles he received in return he did not think anyone minded.

When they all began to make their way out to the banquet, Shufu stepped forward, asking Wangji and Wei Ying to wait a moment. Wangji could see nervousness flicker across Wei Ying’s face as everyone else left the room, and he squeezed his hand gently.

“When we were in the Burial Mounds, I told Wangji in no uncertain terms that I could not approve of this union,” said Shufu gravely, and Wangji felt Wei Ying’s fingers dig tightly into his hand. But Wangji waited – if his uncle wanted to make a true objection or complaint about the marriage he would not have waited until after the ceremony to do so. Sure enough, a small, wry smile tugged at the corner of Lan Qiren’s mouth. “I would never have expected to. But after what I have seen, and what I now know, I must admit that I have, in the past, misjudged you, Wei Wuxian. Moreover, it is clear how much you care for my nephew – I wish you both every happiness.”

Wei Ying gaped, but Wangji gave a small smile and bowed, gently tugging Wei Ying down with him. Shufu bowed back, and then squeezed Wangji's arm. Then, he nodded at Wei Ying and turned, sweeping out of the room.

"Lan Zhan," Wei Ying said, bewildered. "Lan Zhan, did that – did I hear that right?"

"Mn," said Wangji, leaning in to kiss Wei Ying again.

A tiny weight thudded into their legs, and he glanced down to see A-Yuan gazing adoringly up at them.

"Hello," said Wei Ying, sounding amused.

"Hello," replied A-Yuan. "Cheng-shushu says to stop kissing and come out to the banquet already." Wei Ying opened his mouth, but A-Yuan continued. "Li-gugu says that Cheng-shushu shouldn't be mean because it's your wedding, but also that everyone is waiting. Also, Ling-gege says he's hungry."

Wei Ying sighed dramatically. "Well, I suppose we should go."

To be honest, Wangji did not want to go to the banquet – he wanted to continue kissing Wei Ying, to finally take him to the Jingshi, to their bed – that was a much more appealing idea than talking to hundreds of wedding guests.

"Let's go now!" A-Yuan said, leaning back from their legs in an attempt to pull them towards the banquet hall. "Bobo says there's going to be such a big feast and I want to see!"

"It is not polite to pull," said Wangji, holding out his hand for A-Yuan to take instead as he pouted. "We will come, but you must be patient."

"Okay, Baba," A-Yuan said. "I'm sorry."

"You are forgiven," Wangji promised, and A-Yuan beamed at him. Wei Ying wound his fingers through Wangji's. Their hands were still bound, and would be until the next morning, a tradition of the Lan clan that was said to bring good luck.

"Let's go," said Wei Ying, and they stepped into the banquet hall. A huge, excited cheer rang out, and somewhere music started playing, and A-Yuan clung tighter to Wangji's hand, but Wei Ying laughed, his eyes bright and his smile breathtaking.

Wangji hadn't particularly been looking forward to the banquet, given the huge number of people in attendance, but he was surprised to find that he loved every minute of it. Wei Ying was so clearly, blissfully happy, laughing and talking with most everyone that came to see them, and smiling so wonderfully at Lan Wangji every few minutes. The joy and wonder that had filled Wangji during the ceremony remained warm in his chest, and during every moment Wei Ying was at his side, their fingers entwined more often than not.

It was perfect, and as the sun set it ended, and finally, Wangji was able to take Wei Ying back to the Jingshi.

It was, indisputably, one of the best nights of Wangji's life.

## Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed this chapter, and that it was worth the wait - please do let me know if you think so. Hopefully, the next one won't take so long to complete! Until then, please take care!

# Chapter 61

## Chapter Notes

Thank you all so much for your support and your patience! I've got a pretty long one for you today to make up for the wait, and I hope you enjoy it!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Four days after the wedding, Lan Wangji and Wei Ying took A-Yuan to see the rabbits for the first time. There had not been time before the ceremony, and no one else had taken him during the three days Wei Ying and Wangji spent alone in the Jingshi – something Wangji suspected was Sizhui's doing. Sizhui was with them, of course, and after a moment's thought, Wangji invited Zizhen to come, too. Jinling and Jingyi were both spending time with their respective parents, and so was Sizhui. It was not an option open to Zizhen anymore, but Wangji would not wish for him to feel excluded.

A-Yuan chattered excitedly about the rabbits all the way to the meadow, but he grew quiet when they arrived, his eyes going wide at the sight of so many bunnies.

"I still can't believe you kept them, Lan Zhan," said Wei Ying, smiling fondly at him. "I expected they'd be cleared out as soon as I was."

"Ridiculous," said Wangji, smiling back, and Sizhui's head tilted to the side slightly.

"Xian-gege, was it *you* who brought the rabbits here?" He asked, sounding surprised.

"Of course it was! Well, technically it was Lan Yi that brought them into Cloud Recess, but I brought them here. Where did you think they came from? Pets are forbidden in Cloud Recess."

Sizhui gave a delicate shrug, already crouching down to stroke one of the rabbits, which was nosing curiously at his robes. "Baba always said they were wild animals that just happened to live here."

"Mn," said Wangji. He had said exactly that several months ago when the elders first discovered the meadow.

"Ah, yes," Wei Ying drawled, sprawling onto the ground and immediately being approached by several rabbits sniffing his pockets for treats. "Very wild. And you definitely don't feed them."

"There is no rule against feeding wild animals in the Cloud Recess," said Sizhui mildly, sitting down cross-legged and making himself comfortable. Zizhen sat beside him, grinning as one of the rabbits stood up on its hind legs to put its front legs on his knees.

“They’re so cute!” He said, picking the bunny up and nuzzling its nose.

Wangji began to sit, but A-Yuan clutched tightly at him, giving a worried little hum.

“Baba, Baba, they don’t bite do they?” he asked, and Wangji shook his head.

“No. As long as you are gentle, they will not bite,” he said, crouching down. A-Yuan clung tighter for a moment, watching the rabbits with wide eyes. “Have you not seen rabbits this close before?”

A-Yuan shook his head uncertainly. “They always run away.”

Carefully, Wangji shifted A-Yuan onto his hip, freeing an arm to reach out and pick up a rabbit, drawing it close.

“Here,” he said quietly. “You may stroke it, if you are gentle.”

“Gentle,” A-Yuan echoed, tentatively reaching out and brushing his fingers through the rabbit’s fur. His eyes widened. “It’s so soft!”

“It is,” agreed Wangji, and A-Yuan seemed to gain a little confidence, petting the rabbit happily.

As he did, Wangji glanced over at Sizhui.

*“You’ve always been the best father,” Sizhui said, trying bravely to smile even as he was chained to the bed, even as he knew this would be their final conversation. “Always. You... you’ve always been there.” Sizhui’s lips trembled again, but he took a deep breath, and kept talking. “When I was little, you used to bury me in rabbits. Especially if I was upset, or afraid. You never pushed, you just put bunny after bunny into my lap until I couldn’t breathe for laughing...”*

*Wangji’s heart ached as he pictured it, but he did his best to smile down at his son. “Perhaps you can do the same for A-Yuan,” he murmured.*

Carefully, Wangji put A-Yuan down beside Wei Ying, and when he had settled Wangji picked up a rabbit and put it in his lap. Then, he added another, and another, until A-Yuan started giggling, and his little lap was utterly sprawling with rabbits.

“Lan Zhan, are you trying to bury him?” Wei Ying asked incredulously, gleefully, and Wangji ignored him, standing up and moving around to Sizhui. With a small smile, he began gathering more rabbits and piling them onto his older son’s lap. He heard Sizhui’s breath catch, and he glanced at him.

Sizhui’s eyes were shining with tears, but he was beaming, and Wangji smiled back, adding as many rabbits as he could. When he was finished, he gave a small nod, and then ran his thumb over Sizhui’s newly re-instated forehead ribbon.

“Baba,” Sizhui said, but then he was distracted by one of the rabbits standing up on its hind-legs to snuffle around his neck, and he giggled, too.

Wangji gave a small nod. He paused for a moment, and then moved on, placing rabbit after rabbit into Zizhen's lap. The boy's eyes widened, staring up at him full of surprise, and an uncertainty that slowly gave way to happiness, and Wangji gave a small smile, continuing without a word to fill bury Zizhen in rabbits. When his lap was overflowing, Zizhen cradled several bunnies in his arms, and hid his smile in their fur.

Lan Wangji stepped back, pleased with himself, and surveyed his work.

"Hey!" Wei Ying protested. "Why don't I get buried in bunnies?"

"There are none left," pointed out Wangji, and Wei Ying pouted.

"That's no way to treat your husband," he scolded, and a warmth ran over Wangji from head to toe.

"It's okay, A-Die," said A-Yuan, carefully lifting up one of the rabbits that had hopped down from his lap and holding it out to Wei Ying. His expression softening, Wei Ying took the rabbit and pinched A-Yuan's nose.

"What a good boy you are," he said. "Very filial."

"I'm a good boy," A-Yuan agreed, nodding.

Wangji saw Zizhen and Sizhui share a glance and raise their eyebrows. Sizhui reached out casually to put an arm around Wei Ying's shoulders, and then pulled him back down so he was lying on the ground. Even as Wei Ying yelped, Sizhui and Zizhen spilled their entire laps' worth of rabbits onto him, covering him head to toe, and Wei Ying laughed wildly.

"Ah, no!" he cried, the words struggling to escape through his laughter. "Too many, that's too many rabbits! It tickles! Help!"

A-Yuan looked uncertainly up at Wangji, who smiled down at his son. Smiling was so much easier these days.

"He does not need help," he promised. "He is fine."

"Lan Zhan!" Wei Ying wailed – and then cut off, because one rabbit was knocked off his shoulders by another and landed on his face. The poor rabbit scrambled wildly and hopped down, and Wei Ying sat up swiftly, sending dozens of rabbits scattering in different directions as he tried frantically to get fur out of his mouth. "Yuck... Lan Zhan, you're a traitor. You really are."

Wangji raised his eyebrows, and Wei Ying laughed again, reaching out to mess up Sizhui's hair and tug on Zizhen's.

"I'm surrounded by traitors," he declared. "A-Yuan is the only loyal one among you."

"You wished to be buried in rabbits. They buried you in rabbits. I do not see where the disloyalty is," Wangji said.



“Xian-gege, did you say that Lan Yi first brought the rabbits to Gusu? How could you know that? Didn’t she die decades ago?”

Lan Wangji glanced at Sizhui, a little surprised. But then again, he supposed it shouldn’t be surprising that the experience he and Wei Ying had shared in the Cold Caves was not well known. To him, their meeting of Lan Yi and their quest together had always felt so important, had always seemed so significant a part of the war, but in the grand scheme of things it had not been. Their quest had failed, and the war had gone on regardless.

“Well, yes but also no,” said Wei Ying, giving Wangji a small shrug and a tight smile. “I guess it wasn’t our most successful quest... Makes sense no one would tell you about it.”

Carefully, Wangji tucked away the memories of the splintering pain in his leg as Wen Xu broke it, the horror and rage and guilt he’d felt when the Yin Iron he had tried to hard to keep from the Wen clan fell to the ground beside him. The frustration of knowing that for all he and Wei Ying tried, they had been a step behind Wen Chao the entire time, that the Wen had three pieces of Yin Iron and they had none, and Wangji had been away from his home when it was invaded for nothing.

No, it certainly wasn’t their most successful quest. Still, “I do not regret it.”

Wei Ying smiled at him. “Me either,” he said softly. Then, he looked back at Sizhui and Zizhen – who now both looked confused and a little concerned, and grinned. “Story-time! It all began when we took care of a waterborne abyss during the lectures, and Jiang Cheng, Nie-xiong and I decided to celebrate our victory.”

Wangji frowned disapprovingly. Catching the look, Wei Ying’s smile softened. “Ah, I was an obnoxious idiot back then... Did I ever actually apologise for that, Lan Zhan?”

“Mn. For getting in trouble.”

Wei Ying winced slightly, rubbing the back of his neck and giving a sheepish smile. “Well, I’m sorry for the other part, too.”

“What happened” asked Sizhui, a little cautiously, and Wei Ying’s expression grew wry.

“Ah, well... We might’ve snuck in a little alcohol...”

Wangji tuned the story out, turning instead to A-Yuan. “Would you like to feed the rabbits?”

“Mn!” A-Yuan nodded enthusiastically, and Wangji pulled some lettuce from his sleeve, passing it to his son. The boy giggled as the rabbits in his lap all twisted and turned to find the food, and soon the other rabbits were swarming him too, until he was giggling so much that he couldn’t breathe. Wangji kept a hand on his son’s back to steady him, vaguely aware of Wei Ying telling the older boys about their meeting with Lan Yi, and acutely aware of a deep feeling of content.

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To his own surprise Wei Wuxian thought that their time in Gusu came to an end too quickly. Seeing Lan Zhan and A-Yuan and Sizhui playing with the rabbits, seeing just how happy and relaxed his family were... it was lovely. It was especially nice to see Shijie reunited with Zixuan – something he never would have admitted out loud. But his sister was so much happier when her husband was there, and so much more relaxed.

He couldn't help but feel bad for his brother-in-law, too, as Zixuan saw how much Rulan had grown, as Jinling hugged him just a little too tight. He hadn't been able to visit Lotus Pier as much as he'd hoped before the wedding, though he assured them that things in Lanling were, if anything, going better than he'd expected. It was also ridiculously cute to see Zixuan with the two little Wen girls he'd all but adopted. A-Xing and A-Xia had both stuck close to Jinling and Shijie since Zixuan left for Lanling, but when they were reunited in Gusu they rarely left his side, and he was surprisingly good with them.

But, alas, a few days after the wedding, Jin Zixuan had to return to Lanling, and a week or so after that it was time to go back to Lotus Pier.

"Are you sure you're okay with this?" Wei Wuxian asked anxiously as Lan Zhan packed the last of his things in the Jingshi. Lan Zhan straightened, and gave Wei Wuxian a Look, but Wei Wuxian wouldn't back down so easily. "I mean it – it's not so bad living here, I... If you're going to miss it too much we can--"

Lan Zhan walked over to him and kissed him. It was the most effective way of shutting Wei Wuxian up, and also Wei Wuxian's favourite. When he pulled away, Lan Zhan was smiling fondly at him. "I do not mind. I am okay with this. Trust me."

"Well, of course I trust you," Wei Ying grumbled, and Lan Zhan kissed him again. This time, however, when Lan Zhan drew back his face was more serious.

"I hope that you will trust me to tell you if I am discontent. That you will trust me to be honest with you."

"Well, everyone knows you're always honest."

Lan Zhan's eyes grew harder. "That I will be open with you." He paused, and then his expression softened – too much. He looked almost sad. "I hope you will be open with me, too."

Wei Wuxian felt a flutter of guilt and offered a sheepish smile. "I'm getting better."

"You are," Lan Zhan conceded. "Still room for improvement."

Wei Wuxian laughed, pressing his forehead to Lan Zhan's. "I'll keep trying," he promised. "For you."

Lan Zhan frowned. "For you."

"Whatever you say."

"Wei Ying..."

Wei Wuxian laughed, loving how Lan Zhan's eyes softened at the sound even as the irritation remained etched onto his face. "I'm teasing, I'm teasing... If you're sure, then I think we're ready to go."

At that moment, there was a soft knock on the door, and a very familiar voice called quietly, "Hanguang Jun?"

"Come in," Lan Zhan replied, and at once Sizhui came inside, smiling at the sight of them and giving a bow.

"A-Zhui," Wei Wuxian said, a little surprised. "Is everything okay?"

"Everything's fine," Sizhui said, though there was a hint of seriousness on his face that Wei Wuxian didn't like all that much. "I was just wondering if I could talk to you for a minute, before we leave?"

Wei Wuxian felt the guilt rising in his chest again. Of course, Lan Zhan wasn't the only one who would be upset to leave Gusu, wasn't the only one who would feel homesick. Beside him, Lan Zhan nodded, indicating for Sizhui to continue, but Wei Wuxian couldn't help himself.

"Sizhui, do you want to stay here? Because if you miss Gusu I'm sure you can stay, we don't mind, you-"

But Sizhui's eyes widened in surprise, and he shook his head, smiling slightly. "No, Xian-gege, it's not that at all." He paused, and his smile grew a little stronger. "You and Baba are going back to Lotus Pier – why wouldn't I want to go back, too?" Sizhui shook his head, the seriousness returning to his face. "No, I... just wanted to ask about something Jinling said to me, at the wedding."

Wei Wuxian couldn't help but smirk. "Was this before or after he drank so much he fell asleep in Jiang Cheng's lap?"

"During," Sizhui said wryly. "Xian-gege, are you afraid of dogs?"

Whatever Wei Wuxian had expected Sizhui to say, it was not that. His heart skipped several beats and he felt himself wince, though he tried to cover it with a laugh as best he could. "Haha... why would you say that? Of course not?" Even to himself, his voice sounded very unconvincing.

Sizhui's frown deepened, and now Lan Zhan was frowning at him too, and there was a possibility that maybe a little of his fear had shone in his eyes.

"Okay..." Sizhui said slowly. "Are you sure? Because Jinling said you were so scared of his dog that you ran away screaming, and in the Burial Mounds Jiang Cheng did seem surprised that Jinling ever had a one..."

"Jinling is a terrible, unfilial liar of a nephew!" Wei Wuxian spluttered, but Lan Zhan took his hand, his frown deepening. "I'm- urgh..." He sighed, closing his eyes and pinching the

bridge of his nose. “This is so embarrassing...”

“I’m sorry,” said Sizhui worriedly. “I didn’t mean to embarrass you, Xian-gege, I...”

Wei Wuxian waved his hand dismissively. “It’s not your fault. But yes, I might be a little scared of dogs.”

“Wei Ying,” said Lan Zhan quietly. “Why are you afraid of dogs?”

Wei Wuxian groaned. “I... urgh... I lived on the street for a while, before Jiang-shushu found me... A lot of that meant fighting with street dogs for food, and...”

Sizhui gasped, and when he spoke his voice sounded horrified. “You were attacked?”

“Mn,” Wei Wuxian said, refusing to let more of a sound escape his lips. Sizhui didn’t need to know how many times he’d been cornered, how many times he’d felt teeth sink into his legs and his arms, how many times –

Sizhui didn’t need to know.

“I’m so sorry,” Sizhui breathed, sounding heartbroken, and Wei Wuxian opened his eyes, giving a weak smile.

“It’s okay, it was a long time ago. Really, I should probably be over it now... Why do you ask?”

But Sizhui shook his head. “It’s not important.”

Wei Wuxian paused, raising an eyebrow. “You came here to speak privately with us before we left, right? And you said it’s about Jinling? What’s not important?” When Sizhui said nothing, Wei Wuxian narrowed his eyes, thinking carefully. “Is this about Jinling’s dog, in the future? What was it called, Fluffy? Flower?”

“Fairy,” said Sizhui quietly, and Wei Wuxian rolled his eyes.

“What a stupid name for a dog,” he said, shaking his head. Then, he looked at Sizhui again. “Is this about Fairy, Sizhui?”

“Well, yes and no,” he said uncertainly. “I just... I was wondering if you were afraid of dogs then perhaps we could get Jinling a little one, like a lapdog, because he misses Fairy so much, but if you’re that scared of them I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

Wei Wuxian hid another wince. “Well, if he really misses it then... then...” He cringed, looking at Lan Zhan. On the one hand, he would do pretty much any thing to keep Jinling happy. But on the other hand, dogs... “I suppose if... if it stayed away from me then...”

“No,” said Lan Zhan sharply.

“No?”

“You are afraid of dogs. Will not allow dogs near our home.”

Wei Wuxian smiled fondly. “Yes, but Lan Zhan-”

“I think he’s right, Xian-gege,” said Sizhui seriously. “You’ve gone pale – if they scare you that much then we should forget it.”

“But you wouldn’t have come here if Jinling wasn’t really upset,” protested Wei Wuxian. “What sort of uncle would I be if I continued to make him unhappy?”

“One with a sense of self worth,” replied Lan Zhan immediately, and Sizhui shook his head.

“Jinling doesn’t know I’m talking to you. He said he knows Jiang Cheng won’t let him have a dog this time, so it’s not like he’ll know to be disappointed.”

“Yes, but-”

“No dogs.”

“Lan Zhan-”

“Perhaps we may find him a kitten.”

“That might work,” said Sizhui slowly. “I mean, it’d be better than nothing!”

“I’m not saying he can’t have a dog,” protested Wei Wuxian, ignoring the part of himself that screamed with terror at the thought of a dog in Lotus Pier.

“I am,” said Lan Zhan. He turned to Sizhui and inclined his head. “Thank you for bringing this to my attention, A-Yuan.”

“Of course, Baba,” Sizhui replied, giving a small bow. “Are we ready to go now?”

“Mn,” said Lan Zhan, and Wei Wuxian gave in.

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Yanli would never get tired of coming home to Lotus Pier. It was a little upsetting that A-Xuan was not returning with them, that it would be a while again before he did. Before he could. Jinlintai was nice enough, and she was content to dwell there, but she did not think it would ever be home in the same way that Lotus Pier was. Lanling would never sink into her bones, would never feel as much a part of her soul as Yunmeng did. And always had.

Of course, a huge part of that was due to how deeply she loved the people there, and when they returned from Gusu she felt an enormous swell of fondness for those who had been left behind. They had been far from idle while the rest of the clan were away, and the instructions and suggestions that she and A-Cheng had given had all been followed through and then expanded on perfectly – the disciples must have worked from dawn to dusk to get it all done.

Because by the time they got back, the new village for the survivors of the Wen clan was not only fully constructed, but fully furnished. The houses were all complete, but so other

buildings where the Wen could set up shops or teahouses or other businesses, should they choose to, and land had been portioned off and prepared for them to farm. Small gardens were already starting to bloom, and the entire village was surrounded by a waist high wall covered in vines and flowers, and reinforced with wards and talismans that would prevent the uninvited from coming inside. The idea of a half-sized wall had been Yanli's, in part – she was sure that the last thing the Wen survivors would want was to feel trapped or fenced in, and this way they shouldn't, but the wall also provided a physical anchor for the wards, in case of an attack from anyone unconvinced by – or uncaring of – the results of the trial.

Before they left, the buildings had been almost complete, but now the village was ready, and perfect. It was less than a mile from Lotus Cove, and even nearer to Lotus Pier if one cut across the lake, so it took scarcely ten minutes to walk there, which they had to remind A-Yuan twice when they told him that much of his family would now be living here.

He did not seem so much upset as he did bewildered, and perhaps a little indignant, at the fact that most families did not, in fact, live within one square mile of each other. Yanli supposed that it would seem strange to a boy who had lived most of his life with his family in what was essentially a single house and a cave. A-Yuan had expressed similar thoughts before, of course, when he was so shocked that Zixuan, Nie Huaisang, and Lan Xichen did not live at Lotus Pier.

Some of the Wen would be remaining in Lotus Pier itself, predominantly the children that had been accepted as Jiang disciples. Wen Ning and Wen Qing had both been offered permanent rooms in Lotus Pier, too, but they had both decided to dwell in the new village with the bulk of their people. During the day, they spent almost as much time at Lotus Pier as they did their own village, but Yanli thought it was important to them to have a space to call their own. Popo, however, was staying in Lotus Pier, at least for the time being, while A-Yuan grew accustomed to not having his extended family within an almost literal arm's reach at all times.

There had also been a few alterations made within Lotus Pier while they were gone – proper, personal rooms had been set up for all four of the time-travellers, and a new wall had been raised near the back of Wei Wuxian's rooms to create a smaller, cosier room within them – a proper little bedroom for A-Yuan. It was decorated perfectly, beautifully, and someone had taken the time to carve brand new lotus flowers into the bed frame. Already, the bed was made, another new doll resting on the pillows, and A-Yuan's other toys were all tucked neatly away on pretty white shelves.

"Look, A-Yuan!" A-Xian said, bobbing his son on his hip as they stepped inside for the first time. "All yours. You're one spoilt little boy, you know that? Look at all these toys – who needs all these toys?"

"These are my toys," said A-Yuan, a little defensively. "Cheng-shushu said I can keep them all. He said."

"Of course you can keep them, A-Yuan," said Yanli meaningfully, casting a warning glance at her brother. She was amused to note that out of the corner of her eye she could see Wangji sending Wei Wuxian an identical look.

“I never said you couldn’t!” A-Xian protested with a grin, tweaking A-Yuan’s nose. “But you’re not allowed to become a little brat, okay?”

“What’s a brat?” A-Yuan asked, his frown deepening.

“It means you can’t forget how lucky you are to have so many toys and so many things, and you can’t think you’re better than anyone else because you have them.”

A-Yuan’s eyes widened, and he nodded. “I’m lucky. I’m very lucky.” But A-Yuan looked so sincere and so solemn that Yanli’s heart hurt a little. Of course, he would know how lucky he was. He remembered the Burial Mounds. He remembered a little of the camps, too. From the look on her brother’s face the same thoughts were passing through his mind, and he kissed A-Yuan’s nose.

“This is your room,” he said, stroking back A-Yuan’s hair. “It’s all yours.”

“My *room*?” A-Yuan echoed, sounding just as baffled as he had at the concept of the new village.

“Yes. Can’t you see your bed, and your things?”

A-Yuan frowned, looking around. “That’s my bed.”

“It is.” Wei Wuxian nodded, and A-Yuan frowned.

“Where’s your bed?”

“Out here,” Wei Wuxian said, pointing over his shoulder. “In our room – but this is *your* room. Your bed, your toys, your clothes. Your room. Big boys get their own bedroom – when you’re even bigger you can get your own set of rooms, but for now you’ll stay here with me and Baba. At night-time we’ll be just behind this door.”

“Oh,” said A-Yuan, looking adorably confused. “Okay.”

At that moment, Rulan began to cry hungrily, so Yanli excused herself to her own rooms to feed him. She had just finished when there was a small knock on the door.

“Come in,” she called, adjusting her robes and holding Rulan up to her shoulder to burp him. She was unsurprised to see A-Xian making his way inside, a wry smile on his face.

“Hello, Shijie,” he said, flopping down before her and crossing his legs. “Can I... can I talk to you for a minute?”

“Of course,” she said, smiling, and at once he smiled back, reaching out his arms and making little grabbing motions. Rolling her eyes, she passed him Rulan, and her brother immediately took over the burping. “Is something wrong?”

“Not particularly...” A-Xian paused, his brow furrowing slightly. “Shijie, has Jinling talked to you about his... about his dog?”

Yanli blinked, a little surprised, but then nodded. “Yes, a little. Why do you ask?”

Her brother winced. “Ah, well... Sizhui came to find Lan Zhan and I before we left... he said Jinling really misses his dog, and that... that he’s upset because he knows Jiang Cheng won’t him have a dog this time because... of me...”

Yanli straightened her shoulders, frowning down at him. “A-Xian, take that guilty look off your face right now.”

“Guilty look? What guilty look?” he said, but it didn’t even sound like he believed it himself.

“A-Xian,” she said, leaning forward. “Of course we would not allow A-Ling to have a dog anywhere near you. Perhaps when we return to Jinlintai, he may keep a dog there, but I won’t have a dog at Lotus Pier, and there’s no need for you to feel guilty about it. It’s not your fault you are afraid of dogs.”

He shifted, pulling a face. “Shouldn’t I be over it by now, though, really?” he asked, his voice small and vulnerable.

Yanli leant forward further, reaching out to tuck A-Xian’s hair behind his ear. “Xianxian... If it were a normal fear, then I might say yes. But it isn’t, is it? It never has been. I won’t have you living with that fear every day, A-Xian, I won’t.”

He smiled weakly. “Thanks, Shijie... But it really is getting to him. I asked Zizhen, too, and Zizhen said A-Ling never really had friends before, and that’s why he misses Fairy so much, and –”

“A-Xian. If it were a matter of need, I might think differently. But Jinling does not need a dog to survive, and he does not need one to be happy.”

“But after all he’s been through, Shijie... out of all of the time-travellers he’s struggling the most, even Zizhen – what if a dog could help him? They say animals do that, don’t they? I was reading about it, on the road, and...”

Yanli pursed her lips. She knew how deeply Jinling missed Fairy, and she also knew that animals often did well to aid with grief or stress. However, she also knew how deeply A-Xian’s fear of dogs ran. She had wondered, more than once, if there might be a way to cure him of it, but the few times she’d tried when they were children had ended disastrously.

“A-Xian,” she said firmly. “You cannot continue to sacrifice your own happiness for other people’s. If you do, it will make us all most upset.”

“I know, Shijie,” he replied sombrely. “I promise. I just...”

She sighed, considering carefully. “A-Xian... do you think you would be afraid of a puppy? A new-born one, smaller than a rabbit?”

He shuffled uncomfortably. “I... I don’t think so.”



“But you might be,” she finished, pursing her lips again. Perhaps, helping A-Ling would be the motivation A-Xian would need to finally shift his phobia. But she was not willing to take any unnecessary risks. “Perhaps, if it is what you want, you and I could go to see some puppies together. If – and only if – you are able to stand a puppy, we can bring one back for A-Ling. Maybe you will be able to better cope with your fear, too. But if you can’t, then we will send it to Jinlintai. A-Ling can keep it there.”

A-Xian smiled, nodding with a nervous eagerness that reminded her of when he was a child, and Yanli could not help but smile back.

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A few weeks after they returned to Lotus Pier, the weather finally became warm enough that Wei Ying decided A-Yuan could start to learn how to swim. From their son’s reaction, Wangji would have thought Wei Ying had offered him the moon – A-Yuan’s excitement was contagious, and Wangji let his son lead him down the pier at a pace closer to a run than a walk.

“We’re going to swim!” A-Yuan sang for the fifth time in so many minutes, swinging off of Wangji’s hand as he skipped alongside him. “To swim like fishes and frogs and rabbits!”

“Rabbits?” repeated Jinling disbelievingly from behind him. “Rabbits can’t swim.”

A-Yuan frowned over his shoulder at Jinling. “They can so!”

“They can swim,” said Wangji. “But they prefer not to.”

“They prefer not to,” echoed A-Yuan, returning to his happy skipping. “But they can swim, and we can swim! We’re going to swim!”

“Last one in the lake’s a loser!” bellowed a familiar voice behind him, sounding over the thudding of running feet. Jinling, Jingyi, and Zizhen all gave out shouts ranging from indignant to gleeful as Wei Ying pelted past them, sprinting for the end of the pier. He launched himself into the air curled into a ball as he fell, landing with a great splash.

Wangji managed to shift A-Yuan out of the way just in time to stop him from being swept up in the stampede as the three boys ran after Wei Ying. Sizhui hesitated, glancing at Wangji, who raised an eyebrow. There were no rules against running at Lotus Pier. Sizhui grinned, and then took off after the others with a laugh.

“Baba, Baba, we’ll be losers!” A-Yuan cried, tugging on Wangji’s hand and trying to run forward, but Wangji kept his grip tightly.

“No need to rush,” he said. “A-Die is joking. Look at your gege.”

A-Yuan obeyed, glancing to where the four time-travellers were all gasping and splashing in the cold water.

“It’s freezing!” Zizhen laughed, and Jingyi scoffed.

“It’s nothing – you’ve clearly never swam in the cold springs.”

“Race you to that boat there!” Jinling cried, and water flew in all directions as the four boys flailed to start swimming.

“It looks like fun,” A-Yuan said longingly, and Wei Ying laughed, turning back to them and brushing his wet hair away from his face.

“It is fun! Come on, little radish! Lan Zhan, throw him in!”

Despite his obvious enthusiasm, A-Yuan gave a small squeak of protest at that, squeezing Wangji’s hand tightly, and Wangji gave a small frown. Ignoring his husband, he sat down on the edge of the pier and let his feet dangle in the water, sitting A-Yuan on his lap.

“Baba, don’t push me,” A-Yuan said nervously, twisting around to look up at him, and Wangji shook his head.

“I will not,” he promised, keeping an arm secure around his son’s chest. “We will go closer, so you can dip your feet in first. You will stay in my lap. Alright?”

A-Yuan nodded, a nervous smile on his face even as his little hands clutched at Wangji’s arm. Wangji shifted closer to the edge, and A-Yuan looked at Wei Wuxian sharply, seriously.

“Don’t splash us, A-Die,” he said firmly, and Wangji gave Wei Ying a meaningful look over the top of their son’s head.

Wei Ying smiled. “Of course not, little radish. Are you ready?”

A-Yuan nodded, and Wangji lowered him down so his feet could dip in the water. His toes curled up, and he gave a little gasp. “It’s so cold!”

“It’s a little cold, but it’s not too bad once you’re in,” Wei Ying promised, holding out his arms.

Nervously, A-Yuan glanced over his shoulder. “Baba?”

“He is correct,” said Wangji. The water was cool, but as Jingyi said it was nothing like the cold springs, and the sun was warm enough to keep too much of the chill away. “I will lower you into the water, and you can see.”

“Okay,” said A-Yuan, and Wangji shifted his grip, holding his son under his shoulders and then lowering him swiftly into the water, making sure to keep his neck and head above the surface. A-Yuan squealed, his arms flapping at his side and splashing Wei Ying in the face. “Cold! It’s cold!”

“It will take a moment, but you will get used to it,” Wangji promised, and A-Yuan gave a little nod. His hands stopped flailing, instead gripping Wangji’s arms, but Wei Ying swam forward with open arms and A-Yuan transferred his grip to his A-Die instead, wrapping his arms around Wei Ying’s neck and his legs around his chest.

“See, it’s fine,” Wei Ying said, kissing A-Yuan’s forehead. Then, he looked up, smiling at Wangji. With his hair floating out behind him, and lotus petals clinging to his skin, Wei Ying

looked like he belonged in a painting. “Are you coming in, Lan Zhan?”

Wangji nodded, slipping into the water, and together they taught A-Yuan how to float on his back, and how to keep his head above water. With the loud, boisterous games of the time-travellers nearby the morning was far from peaceful, but it was fun — very fun — and by the time they stopped for lunch A-Yuan was able to clumsily swim a few feet on his own, if it was between Wei Ying and Wangji.

Afterwards, they bundled A-Yuan in towels and blankets and sat in the sun, eating the soup that Shijie had made for them, and Wangji marvelled at how wonderful his life could be.

The afternoon’s activities, however, were a little more serious. He, Wei Ying, and Jiang Yanli left Lotus Pier in a small carriage at around three, travelling out for about half an hour, until they reached a Manor House just outside a small town. Though he’d been talkative for most of the journey, Wei Ying grew quieter as the carriage slowed, and he was utterly silent as the lady of the house came out to meet them.

Wangji squeezed his husband’s hand. “If you do not want to do this you do not have to.” In truth, Wangji did not know that it was a good idea to try. Jiang Yanli said that she hoped it may help Wei Ying’s fears ease a little, and if that was the case Wangji would do all he could to assist it, but he did not like the vulnerability and fear stark on his husband’s face.

“We can go home right now,” offered Shijie from the other side. “There are no commitments to break, A-Xian.”

“I’m okay,” he said, forcing a weak smile. “Let’s at least try.”

Wangji nodded, only half listening as Xiao Lang, the lady of the house, spoke to Shijie about how long her family had been breeding dogs, and how she believed she already knew a good candidate among the newest litter of puppies. He had expected to hear the barking and yapping of dozens of dogs, but the house was peaceful. Xiao Lang offered them tea, and then left the room, returning a few moments later with a tiny puppy in her hands.

It could not be much more than a week or two old, still blind and mewling more like a kitten than a puppy, and Wei Ying blinked, staring at it. “That’s a dog?”

Xiao Lang laughed a little, inclining her head. “Yes. She is a week and a half old. She cannot be away from her mother for too long. At this stage, she is completely helpless.” She looked at Yanli. “Would you like to hold her?”

Wei Ying stiffened, but he said nothing as his sister took the tiny puppy into her arms, stroking it gently.

“She’s almost as soft as the rabbits,” she said, smiling, and Wangji watched Wei Ying carefully. He did not look too afraid — his breathing was even, and his face hadn’t lost its colour, but he did look a little apprehensive.

“Wonder dogs like these are very easy to train,” said Xiao Lang quietly. “Even by eight weeks they recognise the word ‘no,’ and their intelligence is extremely high. If trained

properly, she can be taught not to approach you, Wei-gongzi, if that is what you wish. A well-trained dog is also highly unlikely to bite unless ordered to, or highly provoked – this particular puppy’s parents are also both rather laid-back animals.”

Wei Ying hummed noncommittally, staring at the tiny creature as it squirmed and nestled against Yanli’s chest. “It doesn’t look much like a dog yet.”

“Do you want to pet it?” Yanli asked, her voice quieter and gentler than Wangji had ever heard it. Wei Ying stiffened, swallowing, and his sister continued. “You do not have to, A-Xian, but it’s too small to even try to bite you.”

He reached out a single finger, stroking the puppy’s back, and a little of the fear eased from Wei Ying’s face. Then, somewhere nearby, a dog barked.

Wei Ying gave a choking gasp, leaping back away from the puppy with a face as white as ash, eyes blazing with a panic Wangji had never seen before. Wangji caught him as he fell back, and Wei Ying cringed against him, trembling.

“A-Xian, the dog is outside. It can’t get you,” Shijie promised gently, but Wei Ying closed his eyes and shook his head, his lips pursed shut. “Xiao-furen,” Yanli said quietly, passing the puppy back to Xiao Lang, “we would appreciate discretion on this matter.”

“Of course,” the other woman said.

“A-Xian, we can go home now,” murmured Shijie, but Wei Ying snapped open his eyes and shook his head, his mouth set stubbornly.

“No! I can do this. Jinling needs a puppy.”

“He does not *need* a puppy,” said Wangji disapprovingly.

“Jinling *deserves* a puppy,” Wei Ying stared at Wangji stubbornly, as though daring him to disagree.

“You deserve to feel safe,” replied Wangji quietly and Yanli nodded, but although his expression softened, Wei Ying shook his head.

“I know, but... that one... that one didn’t bark.”

“Can a dog be trained not to bark?” Wangji asked Xiao Lang, who grimaced.

“Yes, but even the best trained dogs will bark in certain circumstances.”

“But you can train it to leave me alone? Not to come near me?” Asked Wei Ying, and the woman nodded.

“We will talk about it,” Yanli said, finality ringing in her tone.

They did talk about it. They also included Jiang Cheng in their discussion, who was firmly on the side of no dogs at Lotus Pier.

“But you like dogs,” Wei Ying protested again, and Jiang Cheng crossed his arms.

“And if I want to pet one I go somewhere else to do it.”

But Wei Ying was persistent, and a month later they were back at Xiao Manor. By now, the puppy looked significantly more like a dog with bigger ears and longer legs, and when it trotted over to them, and Wei Ying gave a slight keen, grabbing Wangji’s arm.

“Stop,” said Xiao Lang firmly.

The dog stopped, wagging her tail slowly and sniffing the air. Wei Ying’s fingers tightened around Wangji’s arm.

“What is it doing? Does it - is it hungry?”

Xiao Lang shook her head. “She has just eaten. Even has she not, she will never see humans as prey. She will not hurt you.”

Jiang Cheng, who had chosen to accompany them this time, stepped forward, subtly (or at least as subtly as he ever did anything) positioning himself between Wei Ying and the dog. “She’s kind of cute,” he admitted. “But we’re not taking it back to Lotus Pier unless you can be comfortable with it, Wei Wuxian. Understood?”

Wei Ying nodded, his grip on Wangji’s arm still tight. It hurt, to see so much fear in Wei Ying’s eyes, sharp and clear, and all Wangji wanted was to bundle his husband into his arms and fly away from every dog in the world.

But that would probably not be helpful, so instead, he sat down beside him as Xiao Lang brought out tea, to see if Wei Ying could stand being in the room with the puppy for any given time. The creature was still little bigger than a rabbit, and if it wasn’t causing his husband such distress, Wangji might have thought it cute. It sniffed around Yanli’s skirts, and nudged at Jiang Cheng’s hand in search of fuss. Anytime it grew closer to Wei Ying, Xiao Lang would say, ‘No,’ in the same firm tone, and the puppy would stop. At one point, it tilted its head to the side, looking up at Lan Wangji as if asking why his mistress was being so cruel.

But Wei Ying’s fingers dug painfully into Wangji’s arms the entire time. When they left, he was still quiet, but he insisted that he was fine, that he could come back. Neither Yanli nor Jiang Cheng seemed to be convinced, but they humoured him, and so did Wangji. They returned to Xiao Manor several times, and though the puppy got bigger, it also grew cleverer. It knew to stop when told, knew to move away at the word ‘back,’ and Wangji had not heard it make a sound louder than a whine.

Slowly, over the course of their trips Wei Ying relaxed a little, his shoulders holding less tension, his breath coming more evenly. Eventually, he stopped grabbing Wangji’s arm at every turn, and he no longer stopped breathing when the puppy looked at him. At the end of the fourth visit, he turned to Wangji and his siblings with a grin.

“Well, that went well!”

“Mn,” said Wangji, unconvinced. He still did not like the idea of Wei Ying begging so afraid of anything in their own home. Even if the puppy was very quiet, and apparently very well behaved, and really rather cute. It felt like a betrayal to think of the puppy as cute when it brought Wei Ying so much fear, but Wangji could not help it.

It was very cute.

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“Yes.”

Wei Wuxian’s mouth dropped open, his heart soaring even as shock swept down through his stomach. “Wait – what?”

“Yes,” Wen Qing repeated, her eyes shining as she nodded and smiled. “Yes.”

Since they got back from the wedding, Wei Wuxian had asked her the same question every day, impatiently, whiningly, and every day she’d had the same reply. It had been more than a month now, of hearing the word ‘No’ every morning.

But today...

“Yes?” He whispered, and Wen Qing reached out and squeezed his hands, beaming.

“Yes. You’re ready.”

Despite himself, Wei Wuxian felt tears sting in his own eyes, and he felt his head begin to spin. It had been so long.

So, so long.

And then Jiang Cheng was there beside him, tears on his cheeks – Suibian held in his outstretched hand.

Wei Wuxian took his sword. His fingers were trembling, and a lump rose in his throat. He had not drawn his sword since before the Indoctrination at Qishan. The Wen had taken his sword away, and even when Jiang Cheng returned it to him, Suibian had been lost to him.

But now...

Now...

He drew his sword from its sheath, a feeling of warmth running up his arm as it greeted him, as their energies met for the first time in years. It was like embracing an old friend, a loved one you’d known to be dead, like coming home, like becoming whole. It felt right, right in a way he had forgotten was even possible, and he couldn’t breathe.

“Wei Ying!” Lan Zhan said, alarm in his voice as Wei Wuxian swayed, and then stumbled back, but Wei Wuxian shook his head, smiling weakly at his husband.

“Lan Zhan... Lan Zhan, it’s been so long,” he whispered. “I – I can — it’s been so long.”

Lan Zhan's expression softened, and Wei Wuxian closed his eyes, taking a deep breath. Suibian was eager in his hand, and he felt like even without spiritual energy, his happiness would be enough to let him fly. He felt like the ground was solid beneath his feet, for the first time since he was first thrown into the Burial Mounds.

God, he had missed it.

"Wei Ying," Lan Zhan said, softer, quieter, and then his hand was on Wei Wuxian's arm, and Wei Wuxian realised that he was trembling. He twisted around, slinging his arms around Lan Zhan and hugging him so tightly his husband gave a soft "Mn!" of surprise. When he pulled away there were tears in Lan Zhan's eyes, and in Jiang Cheng's and Wen Qing's, which was unfortunate because that was the moment A-Yuan arrived, swinging between the hands of Sizhui and Jingyi. At the sight of his father's, uncle, and aunt all standing there with tears on their cheeks he gave a little cry.

"Oh no, what's wrong!"

"Nothing," said Jiang Cheng gruffly, before anyone else could, wiping his eyes on his sleeve. "We're happy, A-Yuan. It's all okay."

A-Yuan raised his eyebrows, looking hilariously like Wei Wuxian himself. "Happy? You don't look happy."

"Are you calling me a liar?" Jiang Cheng demanded in a tone of mock anger, and A-Yuan paused for a moment, before giving a definitive nod and an "Mn!"

Jiang Cheng lurched toward him, and A-Yuan squealed in delight, but then Jiang Cheng shifted course, stopping himself short. He turned, and threw his arms around Wei Wuxian instead, squeezing him tight.

"Take care of it this time, you moron," he whispered, and Wei Wuxian hugged him back.

"I will," he promised, and his brother squeezed tighter, before pulling away to go and terrorise Wei Wuxian's son.

It took a little while to get used to wielding a sword again, but it was not as frustrating as rebuilding his core had been. He still had nowhere near the strength he used to, but his muscles remembered the sword forms, and his mind had never lost its edge, so if he was careful not to pour too much spiritual energy into his practise, he could perform most of the same sword forms after a few weeks. After a month, he was able to fly again – only short distances, but still, it was flying, he was flying, and it was so much less terrifying when he was the only one on the sword, when he knew he was in control.

After a month, he was ready for the next terrifying task on his list.

Despite Lan Zhan's offer, Wei Wuxian carried the box through Lotus Pier himself. It was quite heavy, but manageable, and though Lan Zhan, Jiang Cheng and Shijie were flanking him, he wanted to do this himself.

“Jinling,” he called, spying his nephew crossing the courtyard. “I’ve brought you a present.”

“A present?” Jinling asked suspiciously, and Wei Wuxian nodded.

“But there are rules,” he said firmly.

“*You* are setting rules?” Jinling smirked, but the expression faded into concern at the seriousness on Wei Wuxian’s face, and in his voice.

“I am. First things first – it stays away from me. You keep it away from me, or you keep it in Jinlintai. It can’t be too loud, and if it bites anyone it’s out of Lotus Pier. Permanently. Forever. Understand?”

Jinling’s eyes were widening almost to the point it was comical, and he glanced at his mother and Jiang Cheng, and then back at Wei Wuxian. “I... I don’t... you didn’t...”

Wei Wuxian grinned slightly, putting down the box and then taking a few healthy steps back. “Open it.”

His face torn between (hilarious) confusion and (heart-breaking) hope, Jinling opened the box. A small, fluffy head poked out, and Jinling breathed in sharply, putting a hand over his mouth.

“If it gets too big, or too much for A-Xian, it will have to live at Jinlintai,” said Yanli gently. “And the rules are indisputable. There are many reasons A-Xian does not like dogs, and his dislike of them is neither a joke nor a game.”

Jinling nodded desperately, staring with wide eyes as the puppy stared back at him.

“It’s already been taught ‘no,’ and ‘stop,’ and ‘back,’” Jiang Cheng said. “You’ll have to do the rest of the training yourself, but like we said – it stays away from Wei Wuxian.”

Jinling looked up at Wei Wuxian, whose heart skipped slightly. He had, perhaps, miscalculated – Jinling looked utterly stricken, and there were tears streaming down his cheeks, and without even stroking the puppy he stood up, and launched himself forwards –

And he hit Wei Wuxian with a thump and a sob, wrapping his arms around him and pressing his face into his chest. “Thank you!”

Instantly, warmth flooded Wei Wuxian from his heart outwards, and he hugged Jinling back fondly. “You’re welcome.”

But Jinling shook his head, hugging closer. “I know – I know you – I – thank you! Thank you, thank you!”

“You can’t go calling it some dumb name like Fairy, though,” Wei Wuxian said, trying to aim for matter of fact or teasing, and not to let on that he was close to tears himself. “You’re too much like-”



“I love you, Xian-jiujiu,” Jinling choked, and in that moment, Wei Wuxian was certain that this was, one hundred percent, worth it.

“I love you too, A-Ling,” he murmured back, and somehow Jinling held him even tighter. Then, finally, he pulled away, running back to the box and gathering the puppy up into his arms.

“Hello,” Jinling said, in a gentler voice than Wei Wuxian knew he was capable of. “Hello!” The puppy wiggled in his arms, and then licked his cheek, and Jinling laughed.

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Overall, Wangji was very happy. Married life was wonderful, and A-Yuan was thriving, and Wei Ying’s cultivation was improving by the day, and so far the dog had not seemed to bother him at all. It seemed so strange – he was used to being satisfied, content, but to be this happy? It was new. It was wonderful.

Then, Wen Qing cleared Wei Ying to go to Qinghe.

## Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed this chapter! Please do let me know what you thought - I love hearing from you!

Honesty, most of my thought process writing this chapter was arguing with myself that (a) Jinling deserves a puppy but also (b) I don't want Wei Wuxian living in fear the rest of his life. Hopefully I've written it in a balanced way, but all of the characters agree with me on point (b) so rest assured if it did get too much for him, the puppy would definitely be evicted, lol...

## Chapter 62

### Chapter Notes

Hi there! Thank you all for your wonderful comments on the last chapter, and your fantastic patience! I hope this chapter is worth the wait for you!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The first time Lan Wangji met Nie Mingjue, he had been seven years old. Xichen had been so excited – he had been sharing letters with Mingjue for over a year, the correspondence suggested by their tutors as a way to foster the relationship between their sects, but now the Nie were coming to discuss trade terms with Shufu, and Nie-zongzhu was bringing his oldest son with him. Thrilled to be meeting Nie Mingjue in person for the first time, Xichen had chattered excitedly to Wangji so much in the days leading up to it that Lan Wangji had been worried that Shufu would remind his brother of the rules against being overly happy, and using frivolous words.

The friendship between Lan Xichen and Nie Mingjue seemed to be set in stone from their first meeting, but at first Wangji had been wary of the older boy. He quickly became Xichen's closest friend, and as the week-long visit progressed, Wangji couldn't help but wonder where that left him. But when Nie Mingjue noticed him watching their game from around the corner, he simply smiled, and invited him to join in. He called him 'Wangji,' just like Xiongzhong did, and he didn't ask him to speak more than he was comfortable with, or join in games he did not want to play. Instead, he would ask what Wangji wanted to do, and he paid attention to what Wangji said, and praised his achievements with a solemn sincerity that always felt earned, and never like empty flattery.

When Nie Mingjue had returned to Qinghe, to Wangji's surprise he was sad to see the other boy go. Over the years, he had seen much of Nie Mingjue, and respected him greatly. In Wangji's mind, Mingjue had taken on the role of an older cousin, wise and strong, and more caring than most would think.

His opinions of Nie Huaisang were quite different. However, they were also not what he knew most people perceived them to be. It was true that he didn't think particularly *highly* of Huaisang – when they'd first met Wangji had silently observed that the other boy looked like a baby monkey clinging to its mother as he swung off his brother's arm. Wangji would never have been allowed to cling to Xiongzhong like that – after he turned six he was discouraged even from holding Xichen's hand when he was afraid. Nie Huaisang had also, to Wangji's shock and horror, addressed Xiongzhong as 'Xichen-gege,' when not even *Wangji* addressed his brother as 'gege.' He had not done so since their mother died, since he had become so much more careful to follow the rules to the letter, to always be respectful. Xiongzhong was more respectful than Da-ge. It was safer.

But Nie Huaisang addressed Wangji's brother as Xichen-gege.

It had stirred complicated feelings in Wangji when they were still children, emotions that had faded almost entirely by the time they were teenagers. By then, his disapproval of Huaisang was based solely on the other boy's behaviour. He slacked off from both study and cultivation practise, and rarely seemed to take anything seriously. It was as though he lived in a wonderful bubble, as though he could not see the injustice and the evil that lived outside it. However, contrary to popular belief, disapproval and dislike were not the same thing – not in the mind of Lan Wangji, at least.

He disapproved of most of what Huaisang did, and most of his behaviour, and he could not imagine wishing to spend extended periods of time with him, but he did not *dislike* Huaisang. He certainly did not wish harm on him.

For Lan Wangji, among all the things that the time travellers had told them, the fate of the Nie brothers was like a slow acting poison. It had been a shock when Sizhui first spoke of Mingjue's death, especially as the news was delivered almost casually, in a tone that suggested it was old news, nothing too shocking to the youths before him. Learning that Jin Guangyao had murdered Mingjue, that *Nie Huaisang* had attempted to mastermind a revenge plot only to end up stabbing a knife into his own chest in a desperate attempt to undo what had been done – that had been a blow to the gut.

However, at that time those emotions had been swallowed by the thunderous wave of grief and horror and fear that surged through Wangji at the other news, news that was more desperate, and to him, more heart-breaking. Over the first weeks, the first months, he had been too worried about Wei Ying, and about Sizhui and the other time-travellers to dwell too much on the fate of the Nie brothers.

Since then, however, it had been impossible not to dwell on it.

It was for this reason that Lan Wangji consented to go to Qinghe without a fight, when Wen Qing said that Wei Ying was ready to go. Part of him wanted to insist on waiting. She may say Wei Ying was ready, but his golden core held but a fraction of the strength his old one had, and it would take more time to rebuild it. It still seemed too soon since the surgery, too soon since the incident in Qinghe during the trial. But if both Wei Ying and Wen Qing insisted that he was ready, and there was a chance to remove the doom hanging over Nie Mingjue's head before the effects of the blade spirit took a hold of him...

If Wei Ying said that he was ready, Wangji was willing to trust him. He was not happy about it, but the plan they had formed was solid, and Wei Ying had promised him that if something went wrong they would retreat, and regroup, and try again later.

Others had wished to come with them too, of course, but Jiang Cheng was tied up in clan business, and the time-travellers had been ordered to stay behind. Though not hopeless, the mission would be dangerous, and Wei Ying had insisted he would not be able to concentrate enough if he was worried about their sons and nephews getting under foot.

"To be honest, they'd probably be capable of the journey," Wei Ying had whispered to him one night, his voice brittle and close to trembling. "But I can't – we let them come with us to

track Su She and Sizhui and Jingyi.” He choked off, and in the same moment the memory of Su She’s sword piercing through Sizhui’s stomach had speared through Wangji, and he flinched.

“They are safe,” he had whispered back, as much to reassure himself as his husband as he held him tightly. “They have healed. They are safe.”

“I know,” Wei Ying had whispered back, pressing his face into Wangji’s shoulder. “But I can’t take them on a trip like this, not when the stakes are so high, not when – not when I keep remembering it every time I see them in even mild peril.”

The promise had been a simply one to make. “Then we will not take them.”

Sizhui and Zizhen had taken the news relatively gracefully, though Jingyi and Jinling had both protested until Jiang Yanli explicitly forbid them from leaving Lotus Pier. Neither boy seemed able to hold up against her surprisingly steely tone, and they both acquiesced after that.

There had been a much longer debate as to whether or not Wen Ning should join them. His strength was invaluable, and he was certainly much more difficult to harm or kill than the rest of them. Moreover, he wanted to go, to help. To protect Wei Ying. But Wen Ning was also more susceptible to resentful energy. Of course, most spirits and demons could not seek to possess or influence him unless he had already lowered his guard to allow Wei Ying to control him, but the Sabre Spirit was far from a low-level demon. If it was able to possess Wen Ning, the result could be catastrophic, not in the least for Wen Ning himself. In the end, he too had been left behind.

By now, summer had well and truly arrived. The journey was hot, and humid, but there was something very pleasant about travelling alone with Wei Ying. When they arrived at the Unclean Realm, evening was settling in, bringing with it a cool breeze almost as welcome as the meal that had been prepared for them, complete with a rice dish that Wangji was partial to, and several alarmingly red dishes that Wei Ying devoured eagerly.

As they ate, Wei Ying spoke with the two Nie brothers about the details of their plan for the following day.

“We’ve set aside a dozen disciples to come with us,” said Nie Mingjue, looking at Wei Ying. “We can bring more, if need be, but you said a smaller group may be better?”

Wei Ying nodded. “This mission is going to rely more on precision and skill than it is force or brute strength. I’d say twelve is a good number – back up for everyone, but not enough to get in the way. Who’s going?”

Nie Mingjue listed twelve names, several of which Wangji had heard before. He had also met two of them – Mingjue’s second in command, Nie Zonghui, and Nie Rushi, a woman who had been on guard duty the night Wei Ying and Nie Huaisang were attacked. The following day, she had given Wangji an account of the incident. Wei Ying was nodding along to the list, though Wangji wondered how many of the names he had recognised.

Then, before either of them could say anything, Nie Huaisang said in a small, stubborn voice, “I’m going too.”

Lan Wangji paused, his chopsticks poised over his bowl as he blinked, and beside him, Wei Ying looked taken aback.

“Nie-xiong, I’m not sure you want to do that,” he said, and Nie Huaisang raised his chin.

“I absolutely do not want to do it,” agreed Huaisang stubbornly. “I can think of a million things I’d rather do, and very little that I would like to do less, but I’m going all the same. It’s family business. I have to go.”

Wangji glanced at Nie Mingjue, who was looking at his brother with an expression of mingled fondness and concern. It seemed that this was a discussion that had already been had, so when Wei Ying looked at him worriedly, Wangji nodded once.

“What about you, Wei-xiong?” asked Nie Huaisang, his voice quieter again. “Are you sure you’re ready?”

“Yep,” said Wei Ying. “This core’s not as strong as my old one yet, that’s for sure, but it might take years to get to that point, and you don’t need a core for demonic cultivation at all.” Wangji pursed his lips, staring at his husband.

To his surprise, Huaisang didn’t seem much more appeased by that than Wangji did. “But isn’t that why you were able to get so powerful at demonic cultivation? Because it couldn’t damage your core, because there wasn’t one? Won’t it damage your new core?”

“It will,” admitted Wei Ying, “but not irreparably. I shouldn’t have to use *too* much of it on this mission, if all goes well, and afterwards I won’t have to use it often at all. And between them, Lan Zhan and Wen Qing should be able to patch me up.”

Nie Huaisang looked sharply at Lan Wangji, an uncharacteristic, serious questioning in his eyes, and Wangji gave a small nod. It did not like it, but he trusted Wei Ying.

He had to trust Wei Ying.

“According to the plan you shouldn’t have to channel much resentful energy at all,” said Nie Mingjue, looking carefully at Wei Ying. “Though it has been your weapon of choice for so long – it may now go against your instincts to reach for your sword instead. Be aware of that.”

“I will, Chifeng Zun,” said Wei Ying, graciously not mentioning the fact that Wangji, Wen Qing, and Jiang Cheng had all already warned him of the same thing. “I’ve gone over the array, and I’m pretty sure it will work. Unfortunately, I can’t see a way we’ll be able to do this without destroying the sword itself.”

“I suspected as much,” said Nie Mingjue grimly. “We’ve prepared an offering to Nie Su to leave in its place. In the circumstances, I would like to think he would forgive us the disrespect.”

“I’d like to think so, too,” said Wei Ying. “Were you able to find out the name of the sword?”

“Yes,” said Nie Huaisang, brightening slightly. “It took a lot of digging, more than I would’ve expected, but Nie Su’s blade was named Shenjian. So at least when we get there, we’ll know what blade we’re looking for.”

“Excellent!” said Wei Ying.

They set out early the next day, and from the start of the journey disquiet coiled around Wangji’s heart. He knew that this was a trip many of the Nie disciples had made before, and that their plan, in its essence, was simple – there was no reason why this journey should be a fatal one. But knowing did not seem to matter.

Perhaps it was simply that too little time had passed for Wangji to truly recover from the actions of Jin Guangyao, and from Wei Ying’s run in with the Jin the last time they were at Qinghe. Perhaps it had primed him to think of the worst, and his unease was nothing more than hated memories haunting him, lying in wait to see if they would be repeated. The woods around them were thick and dark, and the summer heat was stifling. At times, it was hard to tell whether it was unrest or sweat prickling down the back of his spine.

Wei Ying certainly did not seem uneasy. As they rode out to the ridge where the stone castles lay he was laughing and joking, as though this really was just another night hunt. Even when they came to the stone castles, strangled by vines and rising ominous through the unseasonal mist, Wei Ying seemed more concerned by the heat than anything else.

“I hope it’s cooler inside,” he grumbled, running his sleeve over his forehead. Beside him, Nie Huaisang looked like he was going to be sick, his face flushed and sweaty, his eyes full of apprehension. When Wei Ying caught the expression, his voice grew gentler. “You can always ride back to town and wait there, Nie-xiong.”

“I can, but I won’t,” said Huaisang stubbornly, dismounting and folding one arm over his chest, using the other to fan himself.

“Let’s get this done,” said Nie Mingjue. “Formation!”

Wangji and Wei Ying stood back as the Nie disciplines moved into formation, pouring an impressive amount of spiritual energy into six tiles before the door. As they did, the door to the stone palace opened.

“Huh,” said Wei Ying, sounding impressed. “Nie-xiong, you there’s been problems with grave diggers before? How did they get in?”

Ni Huaisang snorted. “Why do you think we added such a complicated lock? Da-ge says that since it’s been there the wall’s only been breached once – they blasted their way in. But if they try they set off other defences like the disorientation trap.”

Wei Ying scoffed. “Really, how stupid do you have to be to break into a tomb that looks like this? Though I suppose you have to be stupid to be a grave robber in the first place. Perhaps if there was no such thing as ghosts, but everyone knows there’s such a thing as ghosts!”

“Mn,” Wangji agreed, and Huaisang gave another snort, this one a little closer to laughter.

Nie Mingjue stood up, brushing off his hands. “Let’s go.”

Together, they stepped inside.

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It was cooler inside the tomb, but Wei Wuxian’s relief was short lived. The stifling humidity of Qinghe’s summer heat was instantly forgotten in the face of the sharp, unnatural cold of a haunted place, and the sound of distant screaming in his ears. Near the entrance, the resentful energy was weak, but the threat of it thrummed in the distance, a power he could feel crawling over his skin and urging him to reach for Chenqing.

“Wei Ying?”

Startled, Wei Wuxian opened eyes he hadn’t realised he had closed to see Lan Zhan staring at him in concern. He forgot, sometimes, that the ability to hear resentful energy the way he did was a result of demonic cultivation, and not a skill shared by all cultivators. He gave a small smile. “Ah, Lan Zhan... It’s okay. It’s just a little loud in here. But the Burial Mounds were loud, too! I’ll get used to it.” Lan Zhan did not look convinced, his brow furrowed, and Wei Wuxian lowered his voice. “Lan Zhan, do you trust me?”

Lan Zhan stared at him for a moment, his eyes tight with concern, but then he nodded, and Wei Wuxian smiled at him.

“If it’s too much, I’ll tell you,” he swore. “I promise.”

“Mn,” said Lan Zhan, with a look that clearly meant ‘I’ll hold you to that.’

In the first chamber they came to there was a large statue, and here the Nie clan set up the offerings they had brought with them for their ancestors. When the offerings were laid out, the incense was lit, and everyone had bowed, Nie Mingjue rose, and nodded towards a small door.

“It’s this way.”

Though there were candles and torches along the walls, the tomb was dark and cold, and grew darker and colder the deeper they travelled into it. Wei Wuxian got the sense that they were walking down, too, sinking into the earth, and a sense of eery gloom enveloped them. Behind him, Lan Zhan’s white and blue robes practically glowed, but Wei Wuxian and the Nie disciples all seemed to blend in with the stone – something that was a little disconcerting, when you thought about how the stone walls did, on occasion, eat intruders.

They passed several different chambers, but with the exception of a few cursory glances to check that all was in place they hardly stopped at all. Then, quite suddenly, the tunnel they were walking down opened up to an enormous cavern, complete with a wide, deep chasm before their feet, and a single, very rickety looking bridge.

In the corner of his consciousness, Wei Wuxian could hear whispering, too quiet to make out the words, and a feeling of heavy dread settled within him, crawling through his limbs. As if in a trance, he moved to the edge of the chasm and peered down.

It seemed bottomless, and the dark within it was complete, and now he could hear the resentful energy screaming, and it was still far away but it seemed closer now and –

*“When a living person goes in, there is no returning – neither body nor soul. There’s no way he can get out. Wei Ying, let me see if you can keep smiling until the end!”*

A hand rested on the small of his back and Wei Wuxian gasped, twisting away from Wen Chao and losing balance for a moment, flailing dangerously close to the edge –

And then the hand moved, and an arm wrapped around him instead and pulled him back, and a voice said, “Wei Ying!” and it wasn’t Wen Chao, of course it wasn’t Wen Chao, it was Lan Zhan, and Wei Wuxian was an idiot, and he let out a weak laugh.

“Ah, sorry Lan Zhan... you made me jump.”

Lan Zhan stared at him, unconvinced, and to his embarrassment Wei Wuxian realised that all of the Nie disciples were staring at him too. He gave another pathetic little laugh and shook his head, patting Lan Zhan’s arm.

“I’m okay,” he said. “But I don’t recommend looking down. It’s like looking down at the Burial Mounds.”

Some of the Nie disciples seemed more confused by this, which he understood. He’d lived in the Burial Mounds, after all, most infamously. But Lan Zhan’s expression shifted, and he gave a nod.

“Wen Chao is dead,” he said quietly.

Wei Wuxian smiled, a little more strongly. “He is. I’m guessing the way on is across the creepy bridge, right Chifeng Zun?”

“That’s right,” said Nie Mingjue, though he made no move to step foot on it. He was frowning thoughtfully at Wei Wuxian, an expression mirrored by Huaisang, and Wei Wuxian fought not to roll his eyes.

“I promise, I’m fine. I was just startled. Let’s go.”

Without waiting for an answer, he set off onto the bridge. Behind him, Nie Mingjue gave a snort of laughter, and Wei Wuxian relaxed slightly, keeping his steps light. The bridge was stable enough – he knew that because Nie Mingjue was letting Huaisang step foot on it – but it was also old, and some of the wooden planks creaked underfoot. Beneath them, the darkness loomed, and despite his own advice Wei Wuxian found his gaze pulled downwards.

It was a strange sensation, a looming threat he couldn’t quite identify. Something just felt... off. He couldn’t see anything dangerous below, except for the drop itself, but the darkness could easily be hiding resentful energy, the shadows of the chasm shielding its clouds. It was



as though someone somewhere was playing a low note on a guqin, a note so low it could barely be heard, but that thrummed through your body and soul regardless.

His hand tightening around Suibian's hilt, Wei Wuxian listened carefully, trying to catch any words among the distant, endless screams that echoed in his ears. They were deep within the tombs by now, and he was more than halfway across the chasm – he would have expected the resent to be louder by now. He breathed in slowly, clearing his mind and paying attention. Listening.

Among the screams, one kind grew louder than the others. It was a kind of squeaking screech of a sound, short and piercing and repeated over and over, and Wei Wuxian frowned. It didn't sound human, so much as... some kind of animal? But that was strange, for resentful energy – usually, if the sound was animalistic it was a growl or a roar. It was growing louder by the minute, so loud that he knew the others would probably soon sense it too, if they hadn't already.

A waft of stale air brushed past him, and something shrieked in his ear so loudly that he swore, fumbling forwards in his shock.

“Wei Yi-”

The sound of splintering wood cut Lan Zhan's voice short, and Wei Wuxian whipped around in time to see his husband fall, the plank beneath his feet dropping down into the chasm below.

“Lan Zhan!” Wei Wuxian lurched back, grabbing Lan Zhan's arm even as Lan Zhan's other hand grappled with another plank of the bridge, stopping his fall. Heart thudding desperately against his ribs, Wei Wuxian pulled Lan Zhan up, grabbing his arms.

“Wangji, are you alright?” Asked Nie Mingjue sharply, and Lan Zhan gave a stiff nod. His hand was clutching Wei Wuxian's, tight.

“I apologise, Chifeng Zun,” he said. “I did not watch my footing.”

“Don't apologise, just be careful,” replied Nie Mingjue gruffly.

“W-wait,” stammered Huaisang, from somewhere towards the back of the group. “What's that noise?”

Sure enough, the shrieking swelled louder and nearer, so much so that even an ordinary person could hear it, and that same sensation of stale air moving past him was stirring beneath him, coming up from the chasm, and then –

“Run!” Nie Mingjue roared, “Move, now, run!”

Wei Wuxian had hardly taken two steps when the air around them seemed to explode, hundreds upon hundreds of bats bursting out of the cavern and filling the air around them. His first thought was that really, bats weren't too much of a problem compared to the sort of monsters or demons he would have expected to find in a place like this, but then they swept

down in a frenzied pack, biting and clawing at people's eyes and noses and faces, and Wei Wuxian swore.

He ripped his hand away from Lan Zhan's to draw a quick talisman, throwing out a blast of spiritual energy that knocked the bats in front of him back – stunning some of them, killing others. But there were so *many*. They swarmed from all directions, and as fast as he threw talismans and wielded Suibian he couldn't stop a few from getting too close –

Their teeth sank deep into his cheeks and his neck, tearing at his flesh, even as they clawed at his eyes. Pain dragged a snarl from his lips.

Still sprinting, Wei Wuxian flicked Suibian up past his face, nicking his cheek with his own blade as the bat savaging him fell away in pieces.

Behind him someone shrieked, and Huaisang screamed.

Heart racing, Wei Wuxian looked over his shoulder in time to see one of the Nie disciples tumble over the edge of the bridge. Guilt and relief stole his breath when he realised that it wasn't Huaisang, that his friend was still on the bridge, his hand still outstretched towards his fallen disciple.

“Move!” Nie Mingjue yelled. “Faster!”

Wei Wuxian threw himself forward, as fast as he could. If he was slow, the others were stuck behind him, their deaths were on his head –

His feet hit solid stone, and he darted to the side to give Lan Zhan and the others space to get off the bridge, twisting around to watch the others coming. As soon as Lan Zhan's feet left the bridge he span in mid air, pulling out his guqin and sending out a wave of spiritual energy, throwing the bats off target.

For a moment, it seemed to work, but then the creatures regrouped, swooping back down with a vengeance, and if Lan Zhan or Wei Wuxian sent out a stroke with more power they'd risk knocking the Nie disciples off of the bridge.

Right at the back of the group, a man lost his balance, tipping over the edge of the bridge as he tried desperately to claw the bat away from his eyes, and Huaisang gave a cry, lunging for him.

“*Nie-xiong!*”

Somehow, Huaisang managed to grab the man's legs, but the weight dragged him down to his knees, started pulling him off of the bridge too, and between the bats swarming Huaisang's face and the desperate man's flailing legs there was no way Huaisang would be able to hold on for long.

“Huaisang!” Nie Mingjue yelled, and Huaisang tried to pull the other man up, but the screeching of the bats was growing louder, more piercing, and as the last of the disciples made it across Nie Zongzhui and Nie Rushi turned back to sprint towards Huaisang.

They weren't going to make it in time. Wei Wuxian could see Huaisang's arms trembling, could see him slipping closer and closer to the edge, could see him cringing away, unable to raise his arms to protect his face from the bats that swept down towards him and clawed at his hair and his face.

He could hear him gasping, crying out for help through gritted teeth. "*Nie-xiong!*"

"*Huaisang!*"

Lan Zhan sent out another wave of spiritual energy, and the bats fell back.

"Zonghui!" Huaisang yelped, his voice tight with effort. "Help me, I – I can't-"

Nie Mingjue was lurching back towards the start of the bridge, and Nie Zonghui ran faster, but he was still several paces away when the dangling man slipped from Huaisang's hands. Huaisang wailed, but Nie Rushi leapt from the side of the bridge and onto her sword, sweeping down and grabbing the man by the collar. Wei Wuxian heard Huaisang's cry of relief, saw him stumble to his feet and urge Zonghui on, and Nie Mingjue stepped back, out of the way –

And then Wei Wuxian heard the thrumming of hundreds of wings in unison, in time, and the bats swept down, disappearing into the dark. Huaisang and Zonghui were still on the bridge, still running.

And then, together in a whirling mass of hatred and black wings, the bats burst into the bridge from beneath –

The chains snapped –

Planks shattered –

The bridge fell –

Nie Mingjue *screamed* –

Nie Zonghui caught a hold of the severed chain, stopped his fall –

Huaisang didn't.

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading, I hope you enjoyed that chapter! Please do let me know what you thought, I love hearing from you.

Note: I spent way too long researching different Chinese historical and legendary swords trying to come up with a name for Nie Su's sabre/the og sabre spirit and I nearly went insane trying to figure out what to pick/what would be appropriate. I didn't want to

use the name of an actual legendary sword because I imagine these guys would know the legends and I don't know whether that would be weird or not, but I'm not confident enough in my Chinese yet to be able to come up with a decent sounding name with the right sort of meaning. In the end, I decided to be really basic and call the sword 'Shenjian,' which is literally the Chinese translation of Excalibur. If this is culturally inappropriate do let me know.

# Chapter 63

## Chapter Notes

Hello everyone! Thank you for your lovely responses to the last chapter, and for your patience! This one is a LITTLE less late, though still late. In any case, I hope it is worth the wait!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

*“Huaisang!”*

Nie Mingjue’s terror ripped from him in a scream as his little brother fell, arms reaching desperately towards Mingjue, face stark white and terrified as the darkness enveloped him.

*“Da-ge, help me!”* Huaisang cried, but already his voice was far away, and there was nothing Mingjue could do –

Nothing, except launch himself off the side of the cliff.

It was not a wise way to fall, with Baxia beside him rather than beneath him, but falling was faster than flying, and the only thought in his head and his heart was Huaisang. He had to get to Huaisang –

*“Da-ge!”* His brother’s voice tore through him, the fear within it wrenching at his soul.

*“Help, help me!”*

Mingjue’s heart was not beating. It was frozen in his chest, the fear around it too great to let it beat, and he aimed for the sound of his brother’s voice. The way he was falling, he couldn’t ride the sword, but he could steer himself, and he did, willing gravity to pull him faster, praying to every god he had ever heard of to just –

*“Da-ge!”*

There!

He caught sight of white hands in the darkness, reaching up frantically, and Nie Mingjue swept towards them, colliding with Huaisang and snatching him into his arms. At once, his brother’s arms locked around him, and Nie Mingjue clutched him back tighter, steering them towards the wall. With a yell, he drove Baxia into the stone. The wall screeched and sparked as Baxia cleaved through it, but they were still falling, and even as a yell of exertion forced its way through Mingjue’s teeth he could hear Huaisang sob.

A tremor running through him, Nie Mingjue held his brother tighter, and by some mercy they finally ground to a halt. Only the gods could tell how far they’d fallen, how much further

there was to fall before they'd reach the bottom, but Baxia was wedged firmly into the stone, and Nie Mingjue's hand grip was fast around her hilt.

Huaisang gasped several times, struggling to catch his breath, and Nie Mingjue had to take a second to catch his own before he could mutter, "It's alright... I'm here."

"Da-ge," Huaisang whimpered, sounding more afraid than Mingjue had ever heard him. "Da-ge, I'm sorry... I got you in trouble."

"No you didn't," scolded Nie Mingjue gently. "I'm proud of you. Grabbing Huiqing like that. It was very brave."

Huaisang sobbed, pressing his face into Mingjue's chest. "Da-ge... Da-ge..."

"I'm here," Mingjue promised, ignoring the way that his arm was already burning from holding their weight. Instead, he focused on his other arm, and squeezed his little brother again gently. "Da-ge is here. Nothing to worry about." Huaisang gave another sob, though this one sounded at least a little like a mangled laugh. Smiling slightly, Nie Mingjue assessed the situation. There was no way they would both be able to ride the sword back up, not from this position. However... "I'll use a talisman to send you up," he said. "Baxia will do the rest. You're going to be fine."

Huaisang stiffened in his arms, clinging tighter. "Then what – what about you?" Mingjue gave his brother a small smile, but Huaisang keened and shook his head, his fists tightening around Mingjue's robes. "No! No! Da-ge, I can't, I can't!"

"It's alright-" Mingjue began, but his brother cut him off in a voice raw with heartache.

"I can't, Da-ge, I can't – you're supposed – you can't leave me, Da-ge, you can't!"

"Huaisang-"

"No!" Huaisang cried, near hysterical now. "No, I can't, I can't, Da-ge, I can't! I won't let go, I won't! You can't make me!" With that, his brother's voice shifted, a stubbornness Nie Mingjue knew all too well hardening beside the fear. "I won't let go of you, Da-ge, no, no matter what you say or what you do I won't, I won't!" A wild sob broke from Huaisang's throat, and he pressed his face into Mingjue's chest. "If – if you have to d-die here, I'm dying with you!"

"You're not dying here," said Nie Mingjue firmly, fear rising up his throat. He knew how stubborn his brother could be – Huaisang really wouldn't let go now, but how else could he get up? Nie Mingjue was strong, and his core was powerful, but even he could not dangle like this forever, by a single hand.

Huaisang shuddered, and shook his head, his face still pressed against Mingjue's chest. "You can't leave me, Da-ge."

For the first time in a very long time, Nie Mingjue felt tears sting the back of his eyes, and he shook his head wordlessly. If Huaisang wanted to survive, he had to leave. What would Nie

Mingjue's death be worth if his little brother died with him?

He swallowed, three times, and tried to figure out if he could form a talisman strong enough to break Huaisang's grip. "Huaisang-"

Recognising his tone, Huaisang keened, but then from somewhere startling close, there was a loud shout.

*"Nie-xiong!"*

---

It seemed to happen in the span of a heartbeat. Wei Wuxian saw Huaisang running, then Huaisang falling, and then Nie Mingjue dove headfirst off the cliff after him, and panic flared wildly within Wei Wuxian. To dive off like that, without his sword beneath him – it was the only way to get down fast enough to grab Huaisang but what then? Would Nie Mingjue be able to stop their fall? How?

Without thinking, Wei Wuxian threw Suibian beneath him and flew down as fast as he could after the disappearing Chifeng Zun, following the desperate, terrified cries – his only sign Huaisang was still alive. The darkness rushed up to meet him, the bats swarming him, but after a few seconds the creatures stopped their pursuit, and he started to slow down.

It wasn't intentional – he felt like he was sinking through some impossibly heavy cloud, like the resentful energy was somehow slowing his fall while simultaneously dragging him down, down, down –

*There was nothing to break his fall but bones, bones and resentful energy that clawed at him and burnt like acid on his skin, that seared through his mouth and his nose and tried to suffocate him, that tried to fill the gnawing chasm within him with its hatred and its –*

"Da-ge, help, help me!"

The sound of Huaisang's scream pierced through Wei Wuxian's panic and he snarled, forcing his mind to heel. He was still moving downwards. Suibian was steady beneath his feet, his loyal blade carrying him even as his mind fell into panic. But the darkness was deep and dense, and Wei Wuxian couldn't see either of the Nie brothers anymore.

*"Da-ge!"*

Wei Wuxian steered towards Huaisang's voice, but there were other voices screaming in his ears, too, the resentful energy clamouring for his attention, and it was hard to focus –

And then there was a horrific, screeching sound of stone yielding to metal, and then Huaisang stopped screaming.

A blur of white swept down into the side of his vision as Lan Zhan caught up with him, his face set in cold determination as he too followed the sound of the metal and the stone.

Followed the silence in the wake of Huaisang's screams.

Wei Wuxian tried to speed up, but it was difficult – the resentful energy was coiling around him, thickening, slowing him down, and to his side Lan Zhan was similarly struggling. The resentment grew stronger the further they travelled, slowing them more and more, and Wei Wuxian gritted his teeth, pouring more energy into Suibian.

The silence had lasted too long. He didn't know how long, but it was too long – silence meant Huaisang could – meant he could have –

*“Nie-xiong!”*

“Wei-xiong?” The relief that surged through Wei Wuxian at the sound of that weak, trembling cry was so strong his knees buckled, and with a burst of energy he raced towards the sound of his friend's voice.

Beside him, Lan Zhan lit a torch he must have pulled from his sleeve, and the gloom fled from the light, revealing Nie Mingjue and Nie Huaisang dangling precariously from the wall of the chasm. Huaisang's face was white as bleached bone, but it crumbled in relief when he saw them. Nie Mingjue, on the other hand, looked upset, almost defeated.

“Wei-gongzi,” he said, his voice strained with effort as he nodded down at Huaisang. “Please, take him.”

“Da-ge,” Huaisang choked, and Nie Mingjue's face softened.

“I won't fall,” Nie Mingjue promised. “But please, Wei-gongzi, take him first.”

Wei Wuxian nodded, manoeuvring the sword so he was hovering beside them and took Huaisang's arm.

“I've got you,” he murmured, and reluctantly Huaisang let go of his brother, stepping back onto Suibian. He was shaking, violently, and Wei Wuxian put an arm around Huaisang's shoulders, holding him tight as he urged Suibian back to give Lan Zhan space.

The second that they were out of the way, Lan Zhan swept down. With a grunt, Nie Mingjue stepped onto Bichen, and though he kept a grip on Baxia he clamped his other hand down on Lan Zhan's shoulder.

“Thank you, Wangji,” he said, still breathing heavily, and Lan Zhan nodded. Huaisang shuddered, gripping Wei Wuxian's robes tightly, and Wei Wuxian rubbed his shoulder.

He knew what it felt like to fall.

“I instructed your disciples to wait,” said Lan Zhan. “Getting back up may be difficult.”

Nie Mingjue closed his eyes, and then nodded slowly. Huaisang shifted, his trembling hands twisting tighter into Wei Wuxian's robes with a grip like iron.

“What, what do you mean?” he stammered, voice high with fear. “Why, why can't we just fly up?”



“It looked like the bats were guarding the bridge,” said Wei Wuxian, craning his neck back to look up at the gloom they had fallen through. “They didn’t bother us for too long on the way down, so they’re probably territorial. What’s more, when we were on the way down, we... the resentful energy was working to slow us down, Lan Zhan and I, but it still somehow felt like it was pulling us down... It might try to stop us.” He paused, a thought occurring to him. “Nie-xiong, your sabre...”

“I dropped it,” Huaisang said, his glum voice rasping slightly. “When I lunged for Nie Huiqing.”

“Ah,” said Wei Wuxian, wincing slightly.

“You should not have come down,” said Nie Mingjue quietly, his gaze moving between Wei Wuxian and Lan Zhan. “You are not wrong that returning to the surface may be impossible. I know of no story where one who descended this deep was able to return.”

A chill ran down Wei Wuxian’s spine, but he forced himself to ignore it and shook his head. “Well, we’re going to have to be the first then. We won’t know until we try.”

Nie Mingjue nodded mutely and, with considerable effort, wrenched Baxia free from the wall. He stepped on his own blade, and then he, Lan Zhan, and Wei Wuxian nodded.

Wei Wuxian willed Suibian upwards, and they began to rise, but almost immediately it became almost impossible to keep going. Darkness sank around them, heavy and oppressing, pushing down like a great weight, a torrential storm, and then the light of Lan Zhan’s torch was snuffed out.

“Lan Zhan!” Wei Wuxian yelled, at the same moment that Huaisang choked out, “*Da-ge!*”

“*Wei Ying!*”

To Wei Wuxian’s horror, Lan Zhan’s voice sounded far away, too far away, he’d just been at his side and –

“Lan Zhan!”

“Huaisang!”

“Da-ge!”

“*Wei Ying!*”

It was no use. Both Lan Zhan and Nie Mingjue’s voices sounded further away by the second, and Wei Wuxian couldn’t tell which direction to turn. As hard as he tried to fly up, the darkness around him forced him back down, and he let go of Huaisang to reach for Chenqing.

“Hold on, Nie-xiong,” he warned, and Huaisang gave a choking gasp. Wei Wuxian had the impression that he was nodding frantically in the dark.

Wei Wuxian raised his flute to his lips and took a deep breath, clearing his mind, but when the first note rang out the resentful energy *shrieked*, far, far louder than it had before – so loud Wei Wuxian gave a cry of his own at the pain in his ears, and Huaisang cried out too, clamping his hands over his ears and then losing his balance. Wei Wuxian grabbed him, and they wobbled for a moment, and then Wei Wuxian shook his head.

This wasn't working.

*Down!*

No sooner had the thought flashed across his mind, Suibian heard him, and then he and Huaisang were plummeting down the chasm again. Huaisang's grip became painful, and Wei Wuxian put his arm around his friend's shoulders again. The screaming grew quieter, and then faint, and then vanished, and few seconds later, Suibian slowed, before coming to a stop. It was pitch black, and he couldn't even see Huaisang beside him, but he had a feeling that they'd reached the bottom. Tentatively, Wei Wuxian reached down with one foot, relaxing as he felt solid ground just an inch beneath him.

"It's okay, Nie-xiong," he said, stepping down. "We're at the bottom."

Nie Huaisang let out a shuddering breath, and then stumbled off of Suibian. There was a soft hiss as Huaisang lit a candle from his sleeve, and a dull light filled the space they were in. Wei Wuxian swallowed. They were alone, and the space they were in seemed more like a tunnel than a cavern. The walls were so close that if he held out his arms to either side, he could span the tunnel easily.

Huaisang swallowed, and then yelled, "Da-ge! *Da-ge!*"

"Lan Zhan!" Wei Wuxian yelled, and then they both paused.

Silence.

"Wei-xiong," Huaisang whispered. "Wei-xiong, Wei-xiong, what do we do?"

Wei Wuxian took a deep breath. "Well, if we were forced down, chances are they were too. So, let's start walking, see if we can find a way out of here." Huaisang nodded wordlessly, and Wei Wuxian smiled at him, as best he could. "Don't worry, Nie-xiong. I'll look after you."

Huaisang nodded glumly, no trace of a smile on his face.

They set off, but the tunnels seemed to go on forever. It was cold, at the bottom of the chasm, very cold, and Wei Wuxian kept hearing whispers just at the corners of his consciousness. Huaisang stayed close behind him, and didn't say a word, but Wei Wuxian could see him getting more and more agitated. His calls for Nie Mingjue grew more ragged, more desperate, and Wei Wuxian couldn't blame him. He could hear the fear in his own voice, too, when he yelled for Lan Zhan, could feel it pounding through his veins with every beat of his heart.

“Wait,” Huaisang said, “Wei-xiong, we, we’ve already been this way! That pillar, we’ve, we’ve been past it!”

Wei Wuxian frowned, staring at the hunk of rock Huaisang was pointing at. It was at the centre of a crossroads, where four separate tunnels diverged – and he had a bad feeling Huaisang was right.

“Okay, okay, that’s fine,” he said. “It’s not the worst thing that there are loops – that means we’re more likely to bump into them soon.”

“Wei-xiong,” Huaisang said in a trembling voice. “What if they didn’t make it down? What if something happened? Th-the other me got f-five more years with Da-ge, I – I-”

Wei Wuxian put his hands on Huaisang’s shoulders, squeezing tightly. “Nie-xiong, calm down. We have no reason to believe your brother is hurt. He’s strong, and he’s brave, and he’s smart. He’s fine, and so’s Lan Zhan. We’re getting out of here, okay?”

Huaisang looked away, nodding miserably.

They kept walking.

*“You useless piece of trash!”*

Wei Wuxian stopped dead in his tracks at the voice, whipping around, but there was no one there but Huaisang, and it was clear from the startled look on his face that he hadn’t spoken.

“Did you hear that?”

“I – I -” stuttered Huaisang tremulously.

*“Wei Wuxian! You good for nothing – all you ever do is hurt the people unlucky enough to love you! Your husband is dead, and it’s your fault, your fault, you were too weak!”*

“No, no, he’s not dead, he’s – Da-ge, where *are* you?” yelled Huaisang, his voice so aching and broken Wei Wuxian doubted he was talking about Lan Zhan, doubted that the whisperer had told them the same thing.

Wei Wuxian unsheathed Suibian, positioning himself in front of Huaisang, but the voice laughed coldly.

*“Your sons will be orphans, all you ever do is fail, fail, fail!”*

Suddenly, Huaisang seized Wei Wuxian’s wrist. “Wei-xiong!”

Around them, the tunnel began to rumble, and then the end of it darkened as an enormous cloud of resentful energy barrelled towards them, the smell of sulphur in the air, and Wei Wuxian’s eyes widened. He quickly re-sheathed Suibian and grabbed Chenqing, and Huaisang gave a frightened whine, tugging on his arm.

“R-Run, we should run-”

Wei Wuxian focused, playing a quick tune on Chenqing, and Huaisang yelped as a smaller cloud of resent stripped away and streamed towards them. But it worked, forming a perfect sphere around them, creating a bubble utterly free of resentful energy. Huaisang stood silent beside him, breathing heavily.

On one hand, the air around them was clean. On the other hand, the shield of resentful energy around them was so thick they could see nothing outside of it – their candle only illuminated the inside of the bubble.

There was a dull thud, as if something had hit the back of the shield, and Wei Wuxian tensed, whipping around and pushing Huaisang behind him. When he peeled the shield open a crack to see, he caught sight of white and blue robes, glowing softly in the darkness, and relief flooded him head to toe.

He shifted his tune again, ordering the shield to let the man through, and sure enough Lan Zhan slipped inside their bubble, his face grave, but smoothing over slightly at the sight of them both unharmed. At once, he was beside Wei Wuxian, and his hand was on Wei Wuxian's arm, and Wei Wuxian could breathe.

“Wei Ying,” Lan Zhan murmured quietly, relief heavy in his voice.

“Hanguang Jun, where's, where's my brother?” Huaisang asked, but Lan Zhan pursed his lips.

“I don't know. We were separated. The resentment was too strong – I came down. I do not know where Chifeng Zun is.”

But at that moment, there was another bump against the side of the shield, this time from the opposite side Lan Zhan had approached from. Once again, Wei Wuxian opened the shield a slither, revealing a pair of eyes.

“*Da-ge!*”

Huaisang would have launched himself out of the shield and at his brother if Lan Zhan hadn't caught him, and once again Wei Wuxian ordered the shield to lapse for a moment. Nie Mingjue pushed his way inside, and at once his brother launched at him, hugging him fiercely.

“Da-ge, where have you *been?*” he demanded furiously. “We've been calling you for ages!”

“I've been calling you,” Nie Mingjue replied, pushing back to inspect Huaisang for injuries, and then to nod at Lan Zhan and Wei Wuxian. “Until the flute, I heard no reply.”

Wei Wuxian had an idea, but he couldn't say anything given that the moment he stopped playing the flute the shield would crumple in on them. He wasn't sure he wanted to know what the consequences of that would be. He met Lan Zhan's eyes, glancing meaningfully at Chenqing and hoping that his husband understood him.

It only took Lan Zhan a second. “It is possible that the resentful energy swallowed our voices. Made us deaf to each other. Chenqing is a spiritual tool – one that channels resentful energy. As such, it is unaffected.”

“Is that even possible?” asked Huaisang weakly, and Lan Zhan gave a small nod. “Well what do we do now?”

“Can this thing move?” asked Nie Mingjue, looking at Wei Wuxian, who nodded. “Then we move – there’s a chamber just a little way over there, and there’s a ward over the door. Whatever this is, it won’t be able to follow us inside.”

They walked in the direction Nie Mingjue pointed, following the course of the wall. Wei Wuxian saw no door, but after a minute or so Chifeng Zun pushed a point in the wall, sure enough a door swung open. Quickly, they hopped inside, and Wei Wuxian finally took Chenqing away from his lips, drawing in a breath of relief.

In the same moment, he shoved Chenqing back in his belt and grabbed Lan Zhan’s hand. “Lan Zhan, are you okay?”

Lan Zhan smiled fondly and gave a small nod. “Fine. Are you?”

“Of course,” Wei Wuxian said, and Lan Zhan frowned disapprovingly at him. Wei Wuxian laughed lightly, and then leant forward and kissed the tip of Lan Zhan’s nose. At once, the frown collapsed, and Lan Zhan’s ears burnt red, his eyes flickering towards the Nie brothers. They were too involved in a conversation of their own to pay any attention to Wei Wuxian and Lan Zhan. “I love you. I love you so much.”

“I love you, too,” Lan Zhan replied intently, and Wei Wuxian felt himself relax a little.

“Are those bodies?” Huaisang yelped suddenly, and Wei Wuxian actually looked around the room for the first time. Sure enough, there were several long dead corpses in the room with them, most of them no more than bone.

Nie Mingjue closed his eyes for a long moment. “They are.” He said quietly. “This is where previous clan leaders of Qinghe Nie have come when they sensed the sabre spirit was about to take over. To ensure they will not hurt anyone else. I don’t... there’s... there’s no way out, Huaisang. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

Dread dropped into Wei Wuxian’s stomach like a stone as Nie Mingjue sank down to sit on a set of stone steps, staring hopelessly up at Wei Wuxian and Lan Zhan.

“I dragged you into this,” he said, his voice thick with guilt. “This fight has nothing to do with you, but – but you both – I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

Wei Wuxian opened his mouth, but for once Lan Zhan got their first.

“We were not dragged. We are willing.”

Wei Wuxian nodded. “We offered,” he said. “We knew the risks. I know I’d make the same choice again. We came to help, Chifeng Zun. We’re not giving up now.”

Nie Mingjue stared at him with, his face heavy. It almost looked like there were tears in his eyes, and panic flared in Wei Wuxian's heart. He didn't know what he'd do if the great Chifeng Zun started crying... To his relief, Huaisang was there in an instant, sitting beside his brother and clasping his hand.

"It could be worse, Da-ge," he said valiantly. "We're together."

Unconsciously, Wei Wuxian shifted to look for Lan Zhan, and found his husband already looking at him. After a long moment, Lan Zhan turned, and began inspecting the walls. Wei Wuxian nodded and did the same, looking around for any sort of exit. Nie Mingjue did not dissuade them, but his hope in the venture was clearly shown by his staying in one spot. Huaisang, on the other hand, fidgeted when he saw them searching. He patted his brother's hand again, and then stood up to help them. There was a determination in his eyes that warmed Wei Wuxian's heart, and Wei Wuxian turned away to hide his smile. He didn't want Huaisang to see it, in case he thought it was mocking or patronising.

He'd always known that Huaisang was stronger than he seemed – stronger than Huaisang suspected himself. Even in the less-than-ideal circumstances, it was nice to see the proof of it.

"I hear water," said Lan Zhan, and Wei Wuxian's heart leapt.

"Running water?" Huaisang asked excitedly, hurrying over to where Lan Zhan was standing to confirm it, even as Lan Zhan nodded. "That means we're still connected to the outside world, that there's another way in! If there's another way in there could be another way out!"

It brought a smile to Wei Wuxian's face to see Huaisang so eagerly explaining out loud what Lan Zhan clearly thought should have been inferred from the three words 'I hear water.' Lan Zhan always seemed to think Huaisang used too many words, while Wei Wuxian knew for a fact that Huaisang thought Lan Zhan used too few. A huge swell of fondness for both of them rose in Wei Wuxian's heart.

Meanwhile, the pair of them were both still searching for a way out, and Nie Mingjue rose too, at the news of the running water.

"This is weird," Huaisang muttered, staring at a crudely painted monster on the wall.

"Is this really the time to be critiquing the artwork, Nie-xiong?" teased Wei Wuxian, but for once Huaisang didn't rise to the bait. Instead, he ignored Wei Wuxian altogether.

"You'd think they'd be looking at the swords in the picture, but they're not. They're all looking..." He trailed off, glancing across the room, and then he ran across it with a gasp, his eyes lighting up. "Da-ge, this mural is the same as the one upstairs! The one in the discussion hall, look!"

Nie Mingjue strode over, Wei Wuxian hurrying along behind him to peer over Huaisang's shoulder at the mural in question. To be honest, Wei Wuxian hadn't been paying too much attention to the architecture above, being too distracted and impressed by the spells and mechanisms that Nie Mingjue and Nie Zonghui had been pointing out as they checked them.

“No,” said Nie Mingjue slowly. “It... something about it looks off...”

“The eyes...” murmured Huaisang, and then his eyes lit up again and he shook his fist as if waving an imaginary fan. “Its eyes are different – the one upstairs has very round eyes, but this one’s are more focused, like it’s looking over there!”

With that, Huaisang sprang off again, scrambling up a small platform that did seem to be in the mural’s line of view. Wei Wuxian folded his arms and leant back, his eyebrows rising slightly as he glanced at Lan Zhan, who looked similarly impressed, albeit more surprised than Wei Wuxian felt. Of course, on Lan Zhan this translated to his eyes widening a fraction as his head tilted just a little to the side in appreciation.

From the platform, Huaisang peered around the room, first looking at the walls, and then moving his gaze down. Then he gasped again, pointing down. “There’s an eight-sided formation on the ground! There!”

Wei Wuxian looked down in surprise, and then let out a wild laugh. Sure enough, half covered by dust and filth, he could make out the edges of an array carved into the floor. At once, Nie Mingjue bent down, dusting off what turned out to be a focal point, and Huaisang scrambled back down, red-cheeked and beaming.

“If we hit both the poles at the same time something *has* to happen!” he enthused, dusting off the second focal point opposite the one his brother had uncovered.

“Go on then!” Wei Wuxian encouraged, and Huaisang blinked, as though it was unexpected that he might activate the array himself. His eyes glanced towards Lan Zhan, and at his tiny nod, Huaisang turned to his brother.

“Okay then. Let’s try it!”

---

If Xiongzhong was there, he would probably tell Wangji that really, things could have been worse. They lost one of the Nie disciples on the bridge, and he would be mourned, but the others had made it across. Though Huaisang had fallen, he had been saved, and though Wangji had been separated from Wei Ying and the Nie brothers, they had been reunited. The array that Nie Huaisang had found – somewhat impressively – opened the door to a small chamber that, when they all bundled inside it, moved up at an alarming pace, spitting them out by a small door just behind where the Nie disciples were waiting despondently atop the cliff.

And yes, Xichen would concede that Nie Huiqing’s injuries were serious, and it was likely that his eye would not be saved, but his life *had* been saved, thanks to Huaisang, and Nie Huiqing was on his feet, and mobile.

So, if Xiongzhong were there, he would sigh, and comfort himself with the knowledge that it could be worse.

‘Things could be worse’ had never brought much comfort to Wangji. It only reminded him that things could *get* worse, and may well be likely to. The apprehension he had felt at the

beginning of the mission had since hardened into tension and cool displeasure, and the deeper they travelled into the sword hall, the more he wished to grab Wei Ying by the hand and fly back out of the cave as fast as they could.

He wouldn't, of course. Consciously, he didn't even consider it. But he was still very far from happy.

Finally, they reached the final chamber – the place where the blade Shenjian was said to rest.

“Alright,” Wei Ying murmured, “we can't finish the array until we've found the blade. If the spirit sees and guesses what we're doing, it might get angry.”

A murmur of agreement ran out over them, and they split up to search the room. Wangji headed towards the back wall, behind the large statue of a man holding a sabre. The Nie disciples were muttering prayers for forgiveness under their breath as they pushed open coffins, and somehow, Wangji thought he could feel the room grow colder. Concerned, he glanced at Wei Ying, who was wearing an expression of grim concentration as he traced the outline of the array onto the ground. He glanced up and met Wangji's eyes, smiling slightly, but then he quickly turned back to the array.

“I found it!” Nie Zonghui said gravely, and Wangji turned. The man was standing beside an open coffin, staring down at whatever was inside with a complicated expression on his face. Nie Mingjue strode swiftly to his. Side, peering down.

“Shenjian...” he said quietly. “This is it.”

“Okay, I think I'm ready,” said Wei Ying, and Nie Mingjue lifted the sabre from the coffin, his arm jerking a little as he did.

As it was lifted from the coffin, the sabre seemed strangely innocuous. It was an impressive blade, of course, but Wangji could see no visible signs of resentful energy or corruption. Nie Mingjue took a step towards the array, holding the blade out carefully in front of him.

A wrenching, metallic shriek cleaved through the air, so loud that the sound felt like a hot knife stabbing into Wangji's ears. The scream wavered in the air, shifting into something like words, though the sound was more like the screech of metal than a human voice.

*“You dare?! You dare?!”*

With that, the blade ripped from Nie Mingjue's hand, spinning through the air and cutting down the two nearest Nie disciples where they stood, all but cleaving them in two. Spinning around, the blade swung towards Huaisang, and Nie Mingjue roared, deflecting it with Baxia, but the flat side of the of the blade still struck Huaisang in the stomach, sending him flying through the air.

“Huaisang!” Nie Mingjue yelled as his brother crashed down behind a stone coffin and made no sound. But there was no time to check on him – Shenjian twisted in the air, and then pointed at Wangji's chest. With a metallic screech, the blade surged forward, and Wangji blocked with Bichen, but the sabre spirit was fast. The Nie soldiers lying dead on the floor



were neither unskilled nor low, and the sabre spirit seemed intent that Lan Wangji should join them.

It darted through the air almost too fast to track, catching Wangji's arm, his back, the side of his neck, splitting open his skin. He was too fast for the blows to land fatally, but Lan Wangji didn't know how to counter-attack, and the blade was only getting faster.

With a long, low note, Chenqing began to play, and black smoke began pouring out of the sabre spirit, a series of screams ringing in Wangji's ears. Wei Ying played on, his notes certain, commanding, and the sabre began to move towards him. It seemed to be struggling against the call of the flute, but Wei Ying pulled it back through the air –

It shot forwards, and Chenqing's notes grew shrill and alarmed and Wangji had time to block the blade from his heart –

But not enough to stop it sinking into his upper arm. Despite himself, a groan of pain escaped his lips, and he heard Wei Ying's playing grow faster, wilder, and the blade was pulled out of him, the resentful energy once again tugging it back. The blade fought, viciously, but when Wangji glanced at his husband he saw Wei Ying's eyes dark with fury, his concentration unwavering.

The sabre was tugged closer and closer to the array, and Wangji watched with bated breath as the blade reached the edge–

And then it spun around, catching the side of Wei Ying's head with the flat of its blade. In that second, there was a bang loud as an avalanche, and a flash of fierce blue light, and Wangji's eyes closed without his consent.

When he opened them again, blinking away the ghost of the bright light, he saw Wei Ying kneeling in the middle of the array, the sabre lying motionless before him. His head was bowed, but Wangji's heart was pounding desperately in his chest.

Something was wrong.

Something was very wrong.

“Wei Ying? Wei Ying!”

There was a low, cold laugh, a laugh he didn't know, but it was Wei Ying's shoulders that were shaking. And it was Wei Ying that was standing, in a manner far more straight-backed and formal than Wangji had ever seen him move.

“Wei Ying!” His cry came out as no more than a whisper, and Wei Ying turned around.

Wangji met his eyes.

And out of Wei Ying's face, the cold, black eyes of a demon looked back.

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! I hope you enjoyed this chapter - please do let me know either way! I love hearing from you. Until next time, please take care!

# Chapter 64

## Chapter Notes

Hello! Thank you all for your lovely response to the last chapter, I hope you enjoy this one! Just as a head's up, this one's a little angstier than we've had for a while, but don't worry - the happy ending tag is there for a reason :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

*No* –

*No, no, no* –

Frozen, unbreathing, Wangji stared at those cold, black eyes, those eyes that fixed on him with cruelty and hatred, those eyes that stared out from Wei Ying's face. Of all the ways this could have gone wrong, of all the horrors he had imagined, this –

“Wei Ying,” he whispered, the name breaking as it left his lips, and the demon began to laugh once more.

Unthinking, Wangji lurched forward, lunged for his husband, but a hand grabbed him, dragged him back.

“Wangji!” Nie Mingjue yelled, and Wangji yanked his arm yanked his arm as hard as he could, trying to twist out of Nie Mingjue's grip. But Chifeng Zun was one of the very few people capable of beating an outraged Wangji in a battle of strength. His hand tightened, and he pulled Wangji back, grabbing the top of his arm and hissing in his ear, “What are you going to do?”

A snarl left Wangji's lips, but even as his chest heaved and his heart pounded, Wangji knew that it was a good question. He couldn't attack, couldn't fight – not while that thing was in Wei Ying's body, but he couldn't exorcise it alone, either. The sword spirit was too powerful, far too powerful, and if he tried it could hurt Wei Ying, it could kill Wei Ying –

“Get out of him!” he growled, and the demon laughed louder. “Get out of him!”

“No,” the demon said simply, coldly.

“What do you want?” Wangji demanded, straining against Nie Mingjue's grip, though he knew it was useless.

The demon laughed again, but this time it was a low, cold sound, and a chill ran down Wangji's spine. “What do I want? What do I *want*?” The final word was released as a roar, a sound that made the room tremble, and Wangji's hands tightened into fists.

Wei Ying's head tilted back, his neck rolling eerily, and then he looked back at Wangji and Nie Mingjue, baring his teeth. He stepped forward, but was stopped by the array, and a look of fury twisted over his face.

"What do I want? It is my domain you crawled into, my realm you are blundering through! After all I have done, all I have given to Qinghe Nie, you come here now to destroy me?" The demon spoke in Wei Ying's voice, but the cadence was all wrong, so wrong, and then it roared again, dust falling from the ceiling as the room shook. "You ungrateful, pathetic men! How dare you? How *dare* you?"

"All you have given Qinghe Nie?" said Nie Mingjue coldly. "How many of my ancestors have you slaughtered? How many brothers have you killed? You are the bane of Qinghe Nie, not its benefactor!"

Wei Ying's eyes narrowed to slits, his lips curling back to reveal bared teeth. "Nothing in this world comes without a price," he hissed. "The legacy of Qinghe Nie was built upon my strength – if you were unable to channel my power, you would never have built yourself to such a height. Why would such things be free?"

"You speak as though there was a deal," said Nie Mingjue. "I struck no such deal."

"The deal was struck when your ancestors bound me to their throne! They-"

"But," Nie Mingjue interrupted, shifting in front of Wangji. "I will offer a deal now."

"A deal?" The demon's icy voice was tinged with disbelief, and Nie Mingjue nodded.

"If you leave Wei-gongzi, and possess me instead, I will bring you the greatest sacrifice you could imagine," he said, and Wangji's blood ran cold.

He knew full well what Chifeng Zun was saying – if the sabre spirit left Wei Ying, if it took him instead, they could kill him, activate the array – they could end it, with his consent and permission, and the thought made Wangji's stomach lurch.

"Even the Yiling Patriarch is a worthier skin than you," the demon scoffed. "You, who have betrayed your clan and your ancestors with selfishness and cowardice, you who defiled Sword Sacrifice Hall with strangers – strangers! If you think for a second that either of them may leave alive, you are as stupid as you are a disgrace! You are the shame of Qinghe Nie, the shame of your ancestors, the bane of your people!" With that, the demon grabbed Suibian by the hilt, and pulled –

And the blade remained in its sheath. A look of surprise flitted across the demon's face, across Wei Ying's face, and he tugged again, but Suibian stubbornly refused to be drawn.

With a cruel bark of a laugh the demon tossed Suibian away, and Wangji's heart twisted as it clattered across the floor. The demon reached down, picking up Shenjian instead, and turning the blade over in its hand. Then, faster than Wangji could track, he threw the blade with full force. It struck the disciple at Nie Mingjue's side in the heart, the man's eyes bulging for just

a second before the life left him, and he slumped to the ground near the coffin Huaisang had fallen behind.

“Now,” the demon demanded coldly. “Let me out.”

“Leave Wei Ying!” Wangji countered, and the demon’s eyes landed on him. Then, it gave a small laugh.

“Oh, Lan Zhan...” it said, a cold grin spreading across his face, a grin so cold that Wangji froze. “Your Wei Ying doesn’t like it when you talk. He doesn’t want my attention on you, not for a second. His little heart is beating so fast, so fast.” Horror widened Wangji’s eyes, and the demon’s smile grew deeper. “Oh, yes. He is awake. Awake, and aware of everything. He can see what I see, hear what I hear. And he can feel.”

Wei Ying’s hand moved to his pocket, and panic shot through Wangji like a blade as the demon pulled out a knife.

“Don’t-”

The demon stabbed the knife into Wei Ying’s side, still grinning coldly. “Yes. He can feel that. And this-” He twisted the knife viciously, and Wangji cried out, throwing himself forward, but Mingjue grabbed him again, wrapping an arm around his chest to hold him back.

*“Wei Ying!”*

“Let me out,” said the demon. “Or activate your array. Destroy me now – see if the worthless body doesn’t explode from the force of it. See if I don’t shatter his soul before he dies.”

Wangji’s heart beat bruisingly hard against his ribs, and terror burnt through his veins like poison, weakening his knees beneath him. “Let him go! Let him go!”

“Let me out.”

“We will not let you out,” said Nie Mingjue, and Wangji gripped his wrist. “Not when to do so is to sign the death warrant of every soul in Qinghe. Wei Wuxian would never agree to that.”

The demon’s smile stayed in place as it pulled the knife out of Wei Ying’s side, only to dig it several inches into Wei Ying’s thigh instead, once again twisting the blade before yanking it out. Wangji didn’t know what to do – he couldn’t scream, couldn’t move, couldn’t breathe, and then the demon held the knife over Wei Ying’s chest, over his heart –

“Don’t!” Wangji cried, his voice hoarse, and the demon smiled at him, inching the knife an inch into Wei Ying’s chest.

“He can feel all of this,” the demon said softly, dragging the blade down, ripping through Wei Ying’s robes and his flesh all at once as he carved a triangle over Wei Ying’s chest.

Over the brand scar. Horror and revulsion surged up Wangji’s throat like bile as he realised what the demon was doing, as he realised it was retracing old wounds, flaying open old scars

– it was cutting Wei Ying where it knew it would hurt. The stab wound from Jiang Cheng when he left the sect, the dog bite on his thigh that he'd never spoken about, the brand from Wang Lingjiao –

The demon was reopening them all.

“Do you doubt he could feel it?” the demon asked quietly, mistaking Wangji's silent horror for disbelief. “Do you want to see?”

A split second later, the expression on Wei Ying's face changed, the smile disappearing behind a clenched jaw, eyes squeezed shut as his face screwed up in pain, and then he made a sound – a sound Wangji knew too well, a sound he hated – the sound of his husband trying to keep his pain trapped behind his teeth.

“*Wei Ying!*” Wangji fought against Nie Mingjue's grip, but there was no breaking free from it, and Wangji felt the strength leave his knees.

Wei Ying's eyes blinked open, and Wangji's heart stuttered. He could see the whites of his husband's eyes, but more than that he could see the pain and the fear within them – and then Wei Ying blinked, and his face smoothed out, and the black eyes were back.

“This body is no more than my puppet. I need its legs, its arms... It's easier if it's upright, stronger alive than it is dead... but,” the demon paused, twisting Wei Ying's arm around to reach his back, digging the blade in, wrenching the knife across. Wangji heard Wei Ying's robes tearing, knew that beneath them the scars he bore from the Zidian would be open and bleeding once more. “...there's much you can do to a body like this before it breaks.”

“Stop!” Wangji croaked, trying once again to break free from Nie Mingjue's grip. “Please-”

“If you let me out,” said the demon conversationally, as it ripped another line across Wei Ying's back, “I'll end his miserable life before his soul is destroyed. If you don't, I'll slaughter each and every one of you in this body, and I will butcher every last man in Qinghe while wearing the Yiling Patriarch's corpse!”

“If we let you out you will slaughter us all anyway,” growled Nie Mingjue, his arms squeezing Wangji as if trying to hug him, trying to comfort him, but what comfort could there be?

The demon gave a cold laugh, carving a third wound into Wei Ying's back. “You have come here to destroy me – you will not leave here alive. But whether your people die with you or not is your choice. Whether you die immediately or in agony is your choice. Whether the Yiling Patriarch dies a hero or an empty shell is your choice. So let me out.”

“No,” said Nie Mingjue, and the demon's smile finally slipped away.

“Pathetic, disobedient *bastard!*” it roared, slicing across Wei Ying's back with every word, and then it pointed the knife at Nie Mingjue. The blade was covered in Wei Ying's blood, and it dripped from the tip of the knife as it pointed at Mingjue and Wangji.

Then, the demon paused, and it smiled once more. Slowly, it turned the knife back towards Wei Ying, pressing its point against his lower abdomen, against where Wangji knew one of Wei Ying's smallest – and most horrific – scars to be.

The surgical scar left behind by Wen Qing when she removed Wei Ying's golden core.

“No,” Wangji choked, and the demon's smile grew wider.

“Let-” the demon paused to stab the knife into Wei Ying's gut, “-me-” it drove the knife in deeper, and Wangji's knees buckled beneath him, Mingjue's arm around his chest the only thing keeping him from hitting the floor, “-out!”

*“Wei Ying!”*

“Do you want to see him?” the demon mocked, still grinning, and then it blinked.

When Wei Ying's eyes opened again, they were his own, and Wangji could see the silent scream of agony within them as they met his gaze. Horrifically, the demon held the awful, chilling smile in place, creating an awful dichotomy on Wei Ying's face, and Wangji saw a tear trail down his husband's cheek, catch on his lips. Vaguely, Wangji was aware that Nie Mingjue had let go of him. Somehow, his legs didn't give completely – he was still on his feet, swaying where he stood as Nie Mingjue moved to stand in front of him instead, almost blocking Wangji's view –

And Wei Ying blinked, and then he was gone.

The demon's black eyes were back, and it wrenched the knife free from Wei Ying's stomach, splattering blood over the floor.

It raised the knife to Wei Ying's neck.

Wangji lunged, but Nie Mingjue shoved him back, lurching forward himself and raising Baxia. With a roar, Chifeng Zun brought his blade down –

Broke the array.

An explosion of resentful energy burst out from Wei Ying's body, sending the Nie disciples flying back in all directions. With a chorus of screeching clangs, more blades broke free from their coffins and cases, attacking every one of the disciples, and four headed for Chifeng Zun –

And the demon in Wei Ying's body went straight for Wangji.

He leapt back, but it struck him to the ground, hands closing around his throat.

Wei Ying's hands.

“Strangers!” the demon seethed, strangling Wangji with a grip like iron. “Bah! You think you can leave! You'll be the first to go!”

Already, Wangji's lungs were screaming for air. He struggled, trying to throw the demon off, but it was sitting on his chest, knees pinning him on either side, and he couldn't get enough momentum to get it off. What was more, the demon had already proved that the only one to suffer from any injuries it sustained would be Wei Ying.

The only way to get it off him, even for a second, would be to kill Wei Ying. It wouldn't kill the demon, but it would disadvantage it.

Wangji let Bichen fall to the floor.

*"Wangji!"*

He thought it was Mingjue calling his name. It didn't matter. The hands around his throat were trembling and tightening, and the edges of the world were growing fuzzy and dim. As he fought for breath he knew wouldn't, couldn't, come, Wangji could hear a horrible, brittle, shattering sound, like the breaking of bone, but he couldn't place it. Couldn't care.

The demon was staring down at him, still grinning with Wei Ying's face, even as its eyes blazed with anger. Desperation and frustration and bitter grief rose within Wangji, an anguish pumping through him with every frantic beat of his heart.

The worst thing –

The *worst* thing –

He reached up, grabbing the wrists of the hands that choked him. Wangji would not be able to shift their grip, he knew that. But the worst thing of all of this was that Wei Ying was watching, Wei Ying was *watching* the demon use his own body to murder Wangji, and Wangji could not imagine it.

So as he choked, and fought for breath, and tried with weakening efforts to throw the demon off, Wangji rubbed circles on the back of Wei Ying's hands with his thumbs, forced his lips to move into words.

There was no sound, of course there was no sound, but he stared into the demon's eyes, and he knew that Wei Ying was behind them.

*"Wei Ying,"* he mouthed, *"It's alright. I love you."*

There was another cracking, breaking sound, and as white began to swallow Wangji's vision, he wondered if it was the sound of his own spine cracking.

And then Wei Ying's body jerked, violently. And then it jerked again, and the hands around Wangji's neck loosened.

He gasped, and then choked on the sudden influx of air, and even as he coughed Wangji blinked desperately, trying to focus his eyes, to see –

There was a loud, horrific screech, one that sounded less human by the second, and Wangji saw another blinding blue burst of light –



Wangji heard the sounds of a dozen blades clattering to the ground.

Wangji saw Wei Ying collapse onto the ground beside him.

“He did it, it’s back in the blade!” someone was yelling.

“Er-gongzi, now!”

Wangji forced air into his lungs and twisted towards his husband –

And all the air he’d inhaled flew back out of him.

Wei Ying was lying on his side, eyes open and staring and unseeing, blood trickling out of his mouth. He was breathing, but his breaths were coming quick and shallow and Wangji had seen failed exorcisms before. He had seen men driven mad by the ghosts within them, had seen women who had lost their souls before the demons within them could be driven out.

Wei Ying was staring at him, but it didn’t look like Wei Ying could see him at all.

Wei Ying was breathing, but it didn’t look like Wei Ying was – was –

“*Wei Ying*,” Wangji croaked, grabbing his husband’s shoulder, shaking it –

Wei Ying blinked, his eyes fixing on Wangji. Then he blinked again, and recognition broke through the haze of pain and fear in his eyes. Wei Ying made a small, broken sound in the back of his throat, and blood bubbled on his lips, and then the sword spirit screeched again.

It wasn’t over yet.

Wangji snapped into action, rolling onto his knees and easing Wei Ying into his arms as gently as he could. His arm throbbed where the sword spirit had struck him before, but he easily ignored the pain, cradling his husband against his chest.

“Lan...” Wei Ying choked, shuddering against him. “Lan... Zhan...”

“Wei Ying,” Wangji murmured, hearing his own voice break. “Hold on. Please.”

Wei Ying nodded against his chest, and Wangji swallowed, looking up to see what was happening on the other side of the room.

The surprise was strong enough that his mouth fell open.

Hidden by the same coffin that Huaisang had fallen behind was a recreation of Wei Ying’s array, and in its centre was the blade Shenjian. Attached to the sabre’s handle was one of the most powerful lure talismans Wangji had ever seen, and at once he understood.

The sabre spirit had spent so many centuries inhabiting that blade that once the lure talisman was activated, it had been forcibly dragged from Wei Ying’s body and returned to Shenjian, in the middle of the array. As soon as the spirit returned to the sabre, the array had been closed.

The array that was even stronger than Wei Ying's – because it had been drawn entirely with human blood, still damp and glistening.

What was more, there was a man pouring energy into the array, fully activating it, his once-grey sleeves now red with the blood that oozed from his left arm. The blood he had used to draw the array.

The man was Nie Huaisang.

Nie Huaisang, who had never so much as pricked his thumb to cast a spell, had cut open his own arm to re-draw the array, to draw the lure. To save Wei Ying.

As Wangji watched, Huaisang finished activating the array, and the ground around the sabre spirit began to tremble, violently.

*“You dare! You dare! You will die with me!”*

Nie Huaisang stood up, swaying on his feet, and Nie Mingjue swore.

*“Out, get out of here! Everyone out, now!”*

Nie Zonghui – bleeding heavily from a gash on his face, but still very much upright – grabbed Huaisang's arm and leapt towards the chamber's exit, stopping only to grab Wangji's sleeve, too, pulling him along after. Wangji let Zonghui lead him out of the chamber, staring down at Wei Ying. He could feel Wei Ying's breath against his chest, hot and shallow.

Just how deeply had the demon stabbed him? When it twisted the blade, how much damage had been done? When it was ripped from Wei Ying's body, how badly had it hurt him?

The other surviving Nie disciples spilt out into the tunnel after him, carrying the bodies of the dead, but Nie Mingjue did not emerge. There was a beat, and then another, and then Huaisang, now very grey, gave a frightened cry.

*“Da-ge!”*

There was a horrific, rumbling sound, one that could only mean the chamber was collapsing behind them, and Wangji held Wei Ying tighter. If the entire sword sacrifice hall collapsed, they would never get to the surface in time.

*“Da-ge!”* Huaisang cried again, trying to run back in, but Nie Zonghui pulled him back.

*“Gongzi-”*

*“Stay where you are!”* bellowed Nie Mingjue's voice, still inside. *“I mean it, Huaisang, stay put!”*

A few seconds later, Nie Mingjue came out of the door and then immediately turned around, his hands moving faster than Wangji could track. After a second, a glowing golden array came into view, and with a yell Nie Mingjue thrust it forward over the door.

Within the chamber there was an explosion, louder than thunder, and another, and another, and the ground beneath them trembled, and dust fell from the ceiling –

And Wangji watched Nie Mingjue grit his teeth and yell, pouring more energy into the array before him, and even as the chamber before them filled with stone and collapsed in on itself, the array stood firm. Wangji ducked his head, pressed his lips to his husband's hair, held him closer.

And then the rumbling stopped. The ground stopped shaking, and the corridor grew quiet. In that moment, Wangji notice a paperman clinging to Nie Mingjue's shoulder, no doubt how Huaisang had told his brother to break the array. Slowly, Nie Mingjue lowered his arms, and then he staggered back. Nie Rushi ran forward to steady him, easing him down onto the ground as he breathed heavily

"The explosion... is contained..." he said between breaths. "Won't... collapse the rest... Huaisang... Huaisang you... did so well..." Then he looked up at Wangji, his eyes tightened. "Wangji – Wei Wuxian..." Nie Mingjue's eyes scanned over the remaining disciples, and then his shoulders relaxed a fraction. "Huiqing – Nie Huiqing... is a doctor..."

"His spiritual energy has likely been disturbed," said Nie Huiqing, already hurrying over. "If you can give him more, Hanguang Jun, I can tend his wounds."

Wangji nodded shakily, letting Nie Huiqing guide him down to the ground. He kept Wei Ying in his arms, cradled against his chest, and reached for his hand, but when his fingers brushed Wei Ying's his husband gave a gasp of pain. Wangji froze. He didn't remember any harm coming to Wei Ying's hands, but his fingers were swollen, and looked like they were beginning to bruise.

"Wangji," said Nie Mingjue, sharply. "If you can't feed him energy someone else can, but it must be now."

Wangji jumped, and then nodded, taking a deep breath to steady himself and then pouring a stream of energy into Wei Ying's forehead. As he did, Nie Huiqing pulled apart Wei Ying's torn robes to reveal the stab wounds in his side and abdomen, and Wei Ying shuddered, his face turning towards Wangji's chest.

"Lan... Zhan..."

*I'm here*, Wangji thought, but he couldn't say it. His throat felt so tight it was almost like he was still being strangled, and he didn't know how to speak. He held Wei Ying closer, poured more energy into him, sending it through his body, sending it where he needed it.

Wei Ying closed his eyes, pressing his face further against Wangji's chest, but Wangji could feel his breathing evening out a little as the energy streaming into him.

"Fucking hell, Huaisang," Nie Mingjue murmured, sounding so alarmed that Wangji glanced up. Mingjue had pulled back Huaisang's sleeve to check on the wound he had cut to make the array, but even from where he was sitting, Wangji could see that it was a dangerously deep gash. "You didn't have to cut this deep, you – fucking hell..."

“Well, I didn’t know!” whined Huaisang fearfully. “I haven’t exactly done this before, Da-ge! Am I going to lose my arm? Oh, God, am, am I going to lose my arm?! Da-ge, I like having two arms, I-”

“Calm down,” said Nie Mingjue, manhandling Huaisang into sitting down and setting to bandaging the wound. “You won’t lose your arm. You’re not getting out of sabre practise that easily.”

“Easily?!” squeaked Huaisang indignantly, and Wangji heard a soft huff. He looked back down to see a tiny smile at the corner of Wei Ying’s lips, but before Wangji could smile himself, Nie Huiqing applied a powder to one of Wei Ying’s stab wounds. Immediately, Wei Ying’s smile died, and he jerked in Wangji’s arms with a pained whine.

Wangji’s heart stuttered, and he poured more energy into Wei Ying, but then Nie Huiqing looked up.

“Hanguang Jun, I would hold off on the energy transfer for a while now. His spiritual energy levels are stable, and it would not do him well to be overwhelmed.”

Reluctantly, Wangji broke the stream, putting his hand instead on the side of Wei Ying’s cheek. His husband opened his eyes and looked up at him, his gaze glassy with pain.

“Lan Zhan,” he whispered, his voice aching and broken.

“Mn,” Wangji managed, and tears filled Wei Ying’s eyes. They were flickering down, away from Wangji’s face – towards his neck. Wei Ying swallowed, twice, but before he could say anything Nie Huiqing spoke.

“I’ve done everything that I can for these wounds – everything that I can do here, at least.” He gestured to the deeper wound, the one that had pierced through the scar from the core transplant. “This one may well have caused some internal damage, but here is not the place to try and fix that. I believe that Wei-gongzi should be perfectly stable to get back to Qinghe.”

“Hanguang Jun, you should send a butterfly to Wen Qing,” said Nie Huaisang, his eyes round and serious. “Tell her to meet us in Qinghe – if she leaves Yunmeng by sword then by the time we get out of here and ride home she should be there to meet us. She can help Wei-xiong better than anyone.”

Wangji nodded, casting the spell as swiftly as he could. Wen Qing could help. She’d always been able to fix Wei Ying. She would help. He would be fine.

He had to be fine.

“The wounds on your back will need dressing too, Wei-gongzi,” said Nie Huiqing, and Wei Ying gave a weak sound of agreement. Carefully, Wangji helped turn him onto his side and remove the last remnants of Wei Ying’s shirt and outer robes, stroking his hair carefully.

When he saw the wounds on Wei Ying’s back, Nie Huiqing swore softly. “These...”

Wangji followed his gaze, his stomach churning as he saw the deep, red gashes in his husband's back. Each one was but a fraction below the white, burn-like scars from the Zidian, and Wangji clenched his teeth. In his arms, Wei Ying shivered, pressing his face against Lan Zhan's chest again.

"Lan Zhan..." he mumbled, voice thick with pain. "Cold..."

"I will be finished soon, Wei-gongzi," Nie Huiqing promised, and Wei Ying nodded miserably.

"Wei Ying," Wangji murmured, throat hurting with the effort it took to speak, and Wei Ying looked up at him. When their eyes met, Wangji found that he didn't know what to say after all. What could he say? What was there to say? "Wei Ying..."

Nie Huiqing worked quickly, and soon Wei Ying's entire chest was swathed with bandages. Wangji laid his husband in his lap for a moment, quickly taking off his own outer robe. Nie Huiqing understood him at once, helping him lift Wei Ying up to slide the robe underneath him, and Wei Ying blinked at him in surprise.

"Lan Zhan," he croaked, a faint hint of teasing in his voice as Wangji rolled up the sleeve to tuck Wei Ying's hand through. He hadn't forgotten the way his husband had flinched when their fingers touched, and didn't want to repeat it. "You'll look... indecent..."

"Don't care," Wangji replied, adjusting the sleeve and then sliding Wei Ying's other arm into the other sleeve. He closed the robe, tucking it snugly around Wei Ying. "Warmer?"

"Warmer," Wei Ying whispered. He reached up towards Wangji's face with a trembling hand, but Nie Huiqing hummed a warning.

"Wei-gongzi, take care. I still need to bind your fingers..."

"His fingers?" asked Wangji sharply, panic stabbing through him.

Nie Huiqing nodded grimly. "Several of them are broken. There are smaller fractures in two others."

Wangji blinked, staring down at his husband in shock and horror. He hadn't seen anything happen that should have broken Wei Ying's fingers – what else had he missed?! What else could be wrong?!

But Wei Ying looked neither confused nor surprised. Instead, his eyes were tearful, and guilt-stricken, and their gaze was fixed on Wangji's neck.

Oh.

Oh.

"I tried..." he whispered. "Lan Zhan... my Lan Zhan... I tried..."

That splintering sound that Wangji had heard when the sabre spirit was strangling him... Wei Ying had tried so hard to take back control of his body, to stop strangling Lan Zhan – he'd tried so hard that his fingers had broken.

Wangji felt a tear escape the corner of his eye, but even in front of the Nie disciples he ignored it, leaning down to kiss Wei Ying's forehead.

"Wei Ying," he murmured, and Wei Ying gave a weak smile.

"Lan Zhan," he replied, closing his eyes again. "Did... did it work? The array...?"

"It looks like it," said Nie Mingjue, "but I don't want to go about testing it until we're all somewhere safer." He glared over his shoulder at the array still covering the door. "If it hasn't, we've probably got another hour or so before *that* array weakens enough to let anything out, so we should get moving soon."

Wangji glanced at the array, too. It was an impressive feat of cultivation, pulsing with energy, and in truth, Wangji knew that even if the sabre spirit had been eliminated beyond all question, that array had already saved their lives. If the rest of sword sacrifice hall had fallen with the chamber, they would all be dead, but Nie Mingjue had contained the destruction well.

As Wangji pondered this, Nie Mingjue stood up and walked over to his side, nodding at Wangji's arm. "If you're going to insist on carrying him out yourself, I'm going to insist on bandaging your arm first."

Wangji blinked. He'd completely forgotten that the sword spirit had stabbed him before it possessed Wei Ying, but with the reminder he felt the throbbing, burning pain of it. He nodded, shifting his grip on Wei Ying a little so he could give Nie Mingjue his arm. Wei Ying gazed up at him, his face pinched with worry, and Wangji hid his own wince with a small smile, stroking back Wei Ying's hair with his free hand.

"Don't... hurt yourself... Lan Zhan," Wei Ying said, and Wangji rubbed his thumb over his forehead, smoothing out the creases of worry there.

"I will not let you go," Wangji promised quietly. "Will not let anything happen to you."

*Anything else.*

"Do you think we'll be able to get out alright?" asked Nie Huaisang anxiously. "What if the bats are still guarding the chasm?"

A ripple of unease ran over the survivors, and Nie Huiqing flinched, raising a hand to the bandage that covered his eye.

"We'll have to fly over," said Nie Mingjue, "and be quick about it. It doesn't matter if the bats are still there – we still have to go through. We'll keep the injured in the middle of the formation."

The Nie disciples gave a rumble of agreement, but Wangji couldn't help but notice that the injured far outweighed the uninjured, and that many of the less injured among them were carrying the bodies of their dead comrades.

"There," said Nie Huiqing, stepping back from Wei Ying. "It's done. We can go now."

"Suibian," Wei Ying murmured, and Wangji's heart sank, but he wasn't the only one who had heard.

"It's okay, Wei-xiong, I grabbed Suibian, and Chenqing!" Huaisang pulled the flute and the sword from the back of his belt to show Wei Ying, smiling sheepishly. "It was actually Suibian that I used to pull Shenjian near enough to shove it in the array, so uh, sorry and thank you, Wei-xiong."

Wei Ying gave a weak, ghostly laugh. "You're forgiven, Nie-xiong. Thank you for exorcising me."

Huaisang gave a weak smile back.

The journey back through the sword sacrifice hall was largely uneventful. The bats stirred as they crossed the chasm, but they raced across on swords faster than the creatures could catch them. However, that spent a great deal of spiritual power, and after everything else that had happened any hope Wangji had had of flying ahead with Wei Ying was dashed.

Instead, he had to ride on horseback with the others, Wei Ying still cradled against his chest. Wei Ying shouldn't be riding at all, with his injuries, but there wasn't any choice. They didn't have a carriage, and he needed a doctor. He needed Wen Qing.

His condition did not improve as they rode. Wei Ying winced and flinched when the road was bumpier, and after a while Wangji could hear tiny sounds of him gasping or whimpering when the horse jolted, pressing his face against Wangji's chest so hard his nose dug into Wangji's ribs. He was shivering, and his breathing was becoming unsteady again.

Wangji leant down, kissing the top of his husband's head. "Wei Ying?"

"It hurts," Wei Ying admitted in a vulnerable, broken voice, and Wangji's heart clenched. The only time he had ever heard Wei Ying admit to being in pain was when he was joking or whining in a play for attention – Wangji had never heard that small, pained voice before, and he never wanted to hear it again. "Lan Zhan, it... it really hurts..."

"I will fix it," Wangji swore, digging his heels into the horse's side, urging it faster. "I will fix it. You will be fine. Just hold on. We are nearly there."

"Mn..." mumbled Wei Ying, nodding into Wangji's chest.

"You will be fine," Wangji promised, determination rising to match his desperation. "I will fix it. Hold on."

Wei Ying chuckled weakly. "Always do..." he was quiet for a moment, and then he said, "Lan Zhan? Would... would you sing for me? Please?"

Immediately, Wangji began to hum, and his throat screamed in protest at it. But Wei Ying relaxed slightly, and so Wangji ignored the pain, humming their song over and over. By the time they reached the Unclean Realm, his throat was raw and aching, and Wei Ying was a horrible, ashen grey colour.

“This way,” Nie Mingjue said as they dismounted, striding towards the medical halls, and Wangji followed swiftly, but as he did a disciple hurried out from the building before them and bowed low.

“Chifeng Zun, I’m afraid I couldn’t stop them, I thought-”

For a moment, fear twisted in Wangji’s gut, but then he heard a loud, angry voice, and to his complete astonishment, he relaxed a little to hear it.

“Wei Wuxian – what the *fuck* did you do?!”

## Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed this chapter! Please do let me know what you think, I love hearing from you! Until next time, do take care!



# Chapter 65

## Chapter Notes

Hi all! Thank you for the lovely response to the last chapter, I hope you enjoy this one too! Thank you for your patience!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Everything hurt. Everything. From the top of his head to the tips of his toes, Wei Wuxian felt nothing but pain, like the demon was still within him, destroying his body from the inside out. Every wound that the sword spirit had made had been precise, cruel and deep, and intended to cause as much pain as possible without debilitating his body completely. Their agony was sharp, and inescapable, but their cruelty ran deeper than the physical pain. The scars that the demon had chosen to open were tied to the darkest, most painful moments of Wei Wuxian's life, and the fresh pain brought the memories close to the surface, so strong he could barely breathe for it.

It hurt too much.

Every time he whimpered or moaned, Lan Zhan would hold him closer, but the longer they rode the worse the pain grew, and the more tired he got. His eyelids grew heavy, and he wanted more than anything to sleep, but he couldn't.

If he was in this much pain when he fell asleep, who was to say he'd ever wake up?

So instead of letting himself sleep, he nestled closer to Lan Zhan, focusing on the rise and fall of his husband's chest beneath his cheek. He wished that he could hold on, that he could twist his hands into Lan Zhan's robes or grab onto his hand, but the pain in his fingers was sharp and intense and flared whenever he so much as brushed against anything.

Sometimes, the pain was so strong it threatened to knock him out, but he couldn't let it, he couldn't sleep, he –

“Wei Ying?” Lan Zhan asked, his voice heavy with worry.

Wei Wuxian was too tired to whisper anything but the truth, too afraid to keep silent. “It hurts... Lan Zhan, it... it really hurts...”

“I will fix it,” Lan Zhan swore at once, and Wei Wuxian felt the horse gain speed beneath them. “I will fix it. You will be fine. Just hold on. We are nearly there.”

Nearly there. Lan Zhan would fix it – Lan Zhan would make the pain go away. Of course he would. Lan Zhan was so good.

“Mn...” Wei Wuxian nodded into his husband’s chest.

“You will be fine,” Lan Zhan said again. “I will fix it. Just hold on.”

A ghostly laugh left Wei Wuxian’s lips, his ribs aching with the movement. “Always do...” He always held on. Lan Zhan always fixed him. *Always*. “Lan Zhan? Would... would you sing for me? Please?”

Immediately, Lan Zhan began to hum, and Wei Wuxian took a deep, shuddering breath, trying to focus on the song instead of the pain or the fear. He didn’t manage it well. By the time they finally reached the Unclean Real, it hurt just to breathe, and the pain was making the world around him look hazy and dim. Lan Zhan slipped down from the horse, far more gracefully than Wei Wuxian ever could have.

“This way,” said Nie Mingjue, and then a voice said,

“Chifeng Zun, I’m afraid I couldn’t stop them, I thought-”

“Wei Wuxian, what the fuck did you do?”

Jiang Cheng – what was Jiang Cheng doing in Qinghe? Wei Wuxian blinked past the disciple who had been addressing Nie Mingjue. It took his eyes a minute to focus through the pain, and in that time Jiang Cheng’s tone changed entirely.

“Wei – What happened?” he cried, horror replacing the anger in his voice. “What’s wrong? Wangji, what’s wrong with him, what happened?”

“He was possessed,” said Lan Zhan, as Jiang Cheng crashed to their side. “And tortured. His injuries are severe. Where is Wen Qing?”

Jiang Cheng’s face was grey, and he began hurrying back the way he’d come. “This way, this way. We thought – we thought maybe he’d done too much demonic cultivation, worn himself out or... Wei Wuxian...” He reached out, but Lan Zhan stopped him.

“Be careful,” he said. “His fingers are broken.”

Rage and grief flashed across Jiang Cheng’s face in equal measure. “Is it dead? The thing that did it, is it gone?”

“It is no longer within Wei Ying,” said Lan Zhan. Wei Wuxian wondered why, if that was the case, it still hurt so badly. “We believe it to be destroyed. The stakes were too high to test it there.”

Jiang Cheng nodded sombrely, and then they were inside, moving towards a bed, and Wei Wuxian saw a blur of red.

“What happened?” Wen Qing demanded, and Lan Zhan lowered Wei Wuxian down onto a bed, and pain flared across his back.

*“-A-Niang! Please, please no more, A-Niang, no more!” Jiang Cheng was begging, trying to put himself between Wei Wuxian and Yu-furen, but Jinzhu and Yinzhu dragged him away, and the Zidian came down on his back once more, vicious with Yu-furen’s hatred.*

“Wei Wuxian, open your eyes,” said Wen Qing’s voice, firmly, kindly, and Wei Wuxian gasped, his eyes flickering open. Wen Qing was looking down over him, needles in her hands, and Wei Wuxian tried to cringe away.

“Don’t,” he choked, fear coursing through him so fast he wanted to be sick. The thought of not being in control of his body, of being unable to *move* – “I can’t – don’t paralyse me, Wen Qing ... please...”

“I won’t,” she said gently, her face sad. “But Hanguang Jun says they weren’t able to give you anything to help the pain, so I’m going to do that now, alright? Here.” She passed him a small cup, and Wei Wuxian drank it greedily.

It was the last thing he knew for a while.

*The first thing he became aware of when he came to was that the pain had significantly reduced. He could still feel it, a dull aching everywhere, and it was still rather high on the scale, but it was tolerable. Manageable, compared to what he’d had before.*

*He blinked, and the world beneath him came into view, and his heart stopped.*

*He was still in sword sacrifice hall, still kneeling on Lan Zhan’s chest – still strangling his husband.*

*He heard the cold sound of the demon laughing toll through his head. “Did you think you could get away that easily? Hah! Just watch.”*

*No, no, no, he couldn’t be back here, they got out, they got out –*

*“We got out!” The demon mocked. “I showed you that, you pathetic fool! That’s the best way to break a soul – give it one last shot of hope before you rip it all away.”*

*Wei Wuxian felt his hands tighten and he tried to scream, but no sound came. All he could hear was the demon laughing, and the small, choked noises of pain that Lan Zhan’s lips. If he just picked up Bichen, drove it into Wei Wuxian’s heart, he would get away, Wei Wuxian knew he could, but Lan Zhan didn’t, no matter how hard Wei Wuxian prayed for him to do it.*

*“Wei Ying,” Lan Zhan mouthed, his fingers rubbing the back of Wei Wuxian’s hands, “it’s alright. I love you.”*

*No, no, no, it wasn’t alright, it couldn’t – no! No! No!*

*The demon gripped tighter, and horror shot through Wei Wuxian as Lan Zhan’s eyes turned bloodshot and hazy, the softness that had been staring up at him sharpened by pain.*

*No!*

*Lan Zhan's eyes searched for his, the terror and pain in them clear even as they lost focus, as they began to flicker up into his skull.*

*Lan Zhan, Lan Zhan, Lan Zhan!*

*The demon squeezed Wei Wuxian's hands tighter, and Lan Zhan jerked weakly beneath him, and Wei Wuxian's heart screamed.*

*No, no, no!*

*"How long do you think it will take?" crooned the demon. "We'll have to make sure he's really dead. For cultivators like him five minutes usually does the trick."*

*Stop! Stop, stop, please! Wei Wuxian thought desperately, and the demon laughed.*

*"Very well."*

*With all the strength of hell behind it, the demon tightened its grip, crushing Lan Zhan's throat beneath Wei Wuxian's hands.*

*NO! NO, LAN ZHAN, LAN ZHAN –*

*Lan Zhan's eyes widened, and he gave a soft gurgle of pain, choking on his own blood – and then his eyes emptied, and he went still.*

*Too still.*

*NO, NO, NO, NO –*

*Already, his skin was cold beneath Wei Wuxian's fingers, cold like he had been dead for hours, and –*

*NO, NO, LAN ZHAN, LAN ZHAN, PLEASE, NO, PLEASE!*

*- there was no pulse, and he was gone, he was gone, he was gone –*

*NO! LAN ZHAN, LAN ZHAN! LAN ZHAN!*

*"Wei Ying!"*

*LAN ZHAN, LAN ZHAN –*

*"Wei Ying, wake up! Wei Ying!"*

*NO, NO, NO!*

*Lan Zhan was dead, dead beneath Wei Wuxian's hands, Wei Wuxian still couldn't rip his hands away, and he could hear the demon laughing –*

*"A-Xian, wake up!"*

“Wei Ying, please!”

*Please, please no, please no, please no, LAN ZHAN!*

“Wei Ying! Open your eyes, look at me, please!”

There was a pressure on his wrists, a hand on his face, and Wei Wuxian opened his eyes. Lan Zhan was staring down at him, fear in his eyes, and it was only then that Wei Wuxian realised that he was screaming.

“No, no, no, Lan Zhan, Lan Zhan, no!” The words were pouring out of him, tearing out of his throat, and he couldn’t stop them and –

“Wei Ying, I’m here,” Lan Zhan said urgently, his hand pressing against Wei Wuxian’s cheek. “It’s okay, it’s okay. I’m here.”

*It’s not him, whispered a cruel voice in the back of his head. Lan Zhan’s dead, he’s dead, you killed him, this is a dream...*

“No!” Wei Wuxian sobbed, shaking his head. “No, no, please, Lan Zhan, Lan Zhan! No, no –”

“I’m here,” Lan Zhan insisted, his voice breaking. “Wei Ying, I promise, I’m here. I promise.”

*He’s not. You murdered him, he’s dead in the dark in a tomb in Qinghe, and when you wake you’ll see that, you’ll see his corpse already empty –*

“Hold him,” said Wen Qing’s voice sharply, and Lan Zhan looked at her, stricken.

“His wounds-”

“Trust me, put his head on your chest, hold him.” Wen Qing, Wen Qing was there but –

*Of course she’s not there, fool! But she will be – we’ll go to Lotus Pier next, we’ll massacre them all –*

“No! No, no, please,” Wei Wuxian’s sobs rose back into screams, and he barely caught Wen Qing’s command of ‘do it!’ over the sound of his own terror.

A pair of arms slipped underneath him, lifted him up, and then a smaller, cool hand rested on his cheek, gently pushing his face against the chest of the one who held him.

“Wei Wuxian,” said Wen Qing, “Lan Zhan is alive. This is his heartbeat.”

*Dead, he’s dead, he’s gone –*

“No, no, please-”

“Wei Ying,” Lan Zhan murmured, his voice thick with tears. “It’s over. I’m alive, I promise. I promise. Look at me, please.”

With a pained whine, Wei Wuxian obeyed, and at once his eyes caught on the sight of Lan Zhan’s neck. Circled around it were horrific, hand-shaped bruises, so dark and deep it looked like he was wearing an iron collar, and Wei Wuxian broke down, sobs pouring out of him faster than he could control them, faster than he could breathe, and he felt tears burn down his cheeks, and his chest ache.

But he wasn’t screaming.

Not anymore.

“Shh,” said Wen Qing gently, a hand running over his hair. “Listen to his heartbeat. It is real. I promise.”

Gasping through his sobs, Wei Wuxian tried to do what he was told, but he felt more than heard Lan Zhan’s heart through his chest. It was utterly frantic, beating so fast that the rhythm was uneven, a desperate fear racing through him, and Wei Wuxian sobbed, pressing his face into Lan Zhan’s chest again.

“Wei Ying,” Lan Zhan murmured. “It’s over. It’s done. I promise. You are safe. I am safe. I promise.”

*You will never be safe again –*

“Lan Zhan,” Wei Wuxian choked, and Lan Zhan bent down to kiss his forehead.

“I’m here,” he said. “I’m here.”

“Why didn’t you just stab me?” Wei Wuxian sobbed, and though Lan Zhan flinched, there was understanding in his eyes. “I – I was praying that – that you would...”

Lan Zhan met Wei Wuxian’s eyes solemnly. “How could I hope to save my own life by plunging a sword through my heart?”

Wei Wuxian sobbed again, pressing his face back into Lan Zhan’s robes.

“Wei Wuxian,” said Wen Qing gently, and Wei Wuxian forced himself to peek back out, trying desperately to catch his breath. She put a hand on his chest. “Breathe with me, now. Understand?”

Wei Wuxian nodded shakily, and Wen Qing drew in a slow, deep breath. He copied, matching his breathing to hers. In, out. In, out. Slowly, very slowly, the panic receded. Fear still scuttled through his veins, but at least the blind, flailing panic was gone.

“That’s it,” Wen Qing murmured. “Wei Wuxian, right now it might be difficult for you to know what’s real. You can still hear the demon in your mind, you think you might actually still be there.” Wei Wuxian felt Lan Zhan stiffen. “Am I right?”

Wei Wuxian nodded shakily, and Wen Qing tucked his hair behind his ears, freeing the strands that had caught on his tears.

“I promise you, Wei Wuxian, the demon is gone. You are in the Unclean Realm, and you are safe. Lan Wangji is safe.” She paused, running her hand over Wei Wuxian’s hair again. “It is normal to feel this way after a possession, but it will not last forever. I promise. Tell me, what is the pain like right now?”

Wei Wuxian took a deep breath, considering. Now that he thought about it, he couldn’t really feel anything more than a dull, distant throbbing where he knew his wounds to be, and a bone-deep exhaustion through his whole body. “Not... not bad,” he admitted weakly. “I can’t... can’t feel most of it...”

“Good,” said Wen Qing. “That’s as it should be – the tonic I used is a strong one. Hanguang Jun, you can sit down now.”

Lan Zhan nodded, sitting carefully on the bed and arranging Wei Wuxian so that he was still mostly in Lan Zhan’s arms, his head still resting against his husband’s chest. Lan Zhan’s heart was still beating far too quickly, far too fearfully, and Wei Wuxian felt guilt coil in his gut. Then, with a start, he realised that there was a fourth person in the room, sitting beside the bed right in front of Wei Wuxian’s face.

It was Jiang Cheng, and his face was as white as mourning robes. He looked more like a lost child than he did a sect leader – his worry was written all over his face, and there was an anguish in his eyes that sent a shudder through Wei Wuxian.

What had happened? Was it Lotus Pier, had –

“Jiang Cheng,” he choked, “What’s... what’s wrong?”

Jiang Cheng closed his eyes, shaking his head, and Wei Wuxian’s fear rose. His brother hadn’t even made a comment about Lan Zhan holding him, or gagged at the lovely things Lan Zhan had said, and –

“What’s wrong,” Jiang Cheng said slowly, in a voice that sounded very fragile, “is that my brother was just possessed by a demon.”

“Oh...” Wei Wuxian tried to think of something to say, something that would ease Jiang Cheng’s worry, but as he did his brother sat forward, meeting his eyes with renewed intensity.

“A-Xian,” he said warningly, “don’t bother with the ‘I’m okay, Jiang Cheng’s, I know you’re not. I don’t need you to protect me from this.’”

“You don’t have to be here,” Wei Wuxian said quietly. It was hard to get out so many words in a row - his throat hurt. “If it’s difficult for you. I’ll-”

“I don’t give a fuck how difficult it is,” said Jiang Cheng, and Wei Wuxian felt himself relax a fraction at the frankness. “It’s not an ‘out of sight out of mind’ situation. I know I’m not a

doctor, but I'm here, and I'm going to be here until you're better, so you'd better deal with it."

For a moment, Wei Wuxian just blinked at his brother. Then, he offered as strong a smile as he could manage. "Thank you, Jiang Cheng."

Jiang Cheng gave a small nod.

"What time is it?" Wei Wuxian asked, and Lan Zhan held him a little tighter.

"You've been out for two days," said Wen Qing seriously.

"Didn't move at all yesterday," muttered Jiang Cheng, glancing at him worriedly. "You looked like a corpse."

"Jiang Cheng," said Wen Qing warningly, as Lan Zhan shuddered and pressed his lips to Wei Wuxian's hair.

"Sorry," Wei Wuxian murmured, and Lan Zhan shook his head.

"You are at no fault," he said firmly, holding Wei Wuxian even tighter.

"Of course you're not at fault, idiot," said Jiang Cheng quietly. "No one's upset with you. No one wants you to say sorry."

"Sor-" Wei Wuxian began automatically, though he managed to cut himself off at the sight of Wen Qing and Jiang Cheng's annoyed faces.

"Now," said Wen Qing, stealing his attention back. "I've managed to repair the damage the demon did to your organs. It will take some time for the wounds to heal entirely, but they will heal. You'll need several days of bedrest, at least two more, and maybe a third. And my recommendation is not to travel for at least a week."

Wei Wuxian hated bedrest, but he was too tired to argue. However, "We told A-Yuan we'd be back before then," he said. "He might worry."

"We've already written to Lotus Pier. They know that we're going to be a little late back, but also that you're going to be okay. Because you will be," said Jiang Cheng, his tone almost a threat.

"Okay," said Wei Wuxian weakly. He could feel his eyelids growing heavy, but he refused to sleep. He wasn't sure he ever wanted to sleep again. "Is Nie-xiong okay?"

Jiang Cheng snorted. "He's fine. His arm's already almost healed, but it's a wonder he didn't wake you up whining about it."

"He has been in both days," said Lan Zhan quietly. "He is worried about you."

Wei Wuxian looked up at his husband. "Did it work? The array, did... is the sabre spirit gone?"



“We believe so,” said Lan Zhan. “Nie Mingjue can no longer sense nor channel its energy through Baxia. It is likely that it has been destroyed completely. In another week he intends to return to sword sacrifice hall to check that there is no sign of its surviving, but other than that it is over.” He paused. “Qinghe Nie intend to look for a better long-term method of placating the other blades, but without the sword spirit to drive them, their capacity to do harm is greatly reduced. Cultivating with a sabre will always have its risks, but now any master who practises his temperament will not need to fear qi deviation. Nie Mingjue is free.”

Relief seeped through Wei Wuxian’s body. “Good...” His eyelids flickered, and he winced, looking for Wen Qing. “Wen Qing... can you give me something... to stay awake?”

“I think it would do you good to get some more sleep,” she said, and at once panic began to surge through Wei Wuxian again.

“No,” he said immediately, aware that his voice was tight and fearful and unable to care about it, “No, Qing-jie, please, I can’t – I can’t... I...” he looked desperately up at Lan Zhan, at living, breathing Lan Zhan, and felt his eyes burn with tears. “Please, please don’t let me go to sleep.”

“Wei Wuxian,” said Wen Qing, more firmly, “you will not heal if you do not rest.”

“I can’t,” he cried, automatically trying to grab Lan Zhan’s robes and hissing when sharp pain shot through his fingers. “I can’t, I can’t, please –”

“What’s wrong?” demanded Jiang Cheng, looking between Wei Wuxian and Wen Qing. “Is it nightmares? Can you give him something to keep the nightmares away?”

“I can try,” said Wen Qing, but she didn’t sound convinced, and Wei Wuxian felt his throat begin to close up.

As though someone was strangling him.

“I *can*’t,” he choked, and Lan Zhan shifted his grip to run a hand over Wei Wuxian’s hair, kissing the top of his head.

“Breathe, Wei Ying,” he murmured, and Wei Wuxian struggled to obey.

“Don’t make me sleep,” he begged, staring up at Lan Zhan desperately. “I thought – I thought I’d k- Lan Zhan, I thought I’d killed you, I can’t, I can’t-”

Lan Zhan leant down and kissed his forehead. Then, he rested his own forehead against Wei Wuxian’s for a moment, and Wei Wuxian felt the cool metal of the emblem of his headband grow warm between them.

“I will hold you while you sleep,” he promised. “I will be here when you wake.”

“No,” Wei Wuxian protested, but his eyelids were growing heavier by the second. He caught a familiar scent in the air, and tried to look at Wen Qing, heart stinging with betrayal. It was

incense, similar to the one they'd used to knock out Yanli before. "Lan Zhan," he whispered, and then the world went black again.

---

Jiang Cheng swallowed hard as his brother fell limp in Wangji's arms, returning to a state just as still as he had been until half an hour ago.

When he'd started screaming.

"Did you have to knock him out like that?" he asked Wen Qing, his voice a little hoarse.

"Yes," she said heavily. "He was too weak to stay up for much longer, and he was getting agitated."

Jiang Cheng felt his own helplessness claw up his spine, and as ever it left his mouth as anger. "Of course he was agitated! Didn't you *hear* him? He thought that damned demon managed to kill Wangji – how many times do you think he can dream that before he goes mad?"

Wen Qing shot him a sharp look, but there was an understanding behind her eyes. She expressed concern through anger too, after all. Wangji, meanwhile, only shuddered, closing his eyes and tucking Wei Wuxian's head against his chest, bowing his own head over him. To be honest, he didn't look much better than Wei Wuxian. He was pale, alarmingly so, and there were dark rings beneath his eyes, though not as dark as the ring of bruises around his neck. It made Jiang Cheng's stomach squirm every time he looked at it. Jiang Cheng had long since given up on trying to read Lan Wangji's facial expressions, but he didn't need Wei Wuxian to translate the despair on his brother-in-law's face now.

Jiang Cheng swallowed again, glancing back at Wen Qing. "He is going to be alright, isn't he?"

To her great credit, she acted as though this wasn't the thirty seventh time someone had asked her that over the last two days. "Yes," she said softly. "It will take some time for his mind to settle. Reopening those wounds... it will bring up old traumas. But he will heal. We will make sure of that."

Completely unbidden, Jiang Cheng's memory tumbled back to the day before yesterday, when he first saw the extent of Wei Wuxian's injuries. His back was bad enough, deep gashes tearing across his flesh to underline the scars from the Zidian, but then Wen Qing and Wangji turned him over. Jiang Cheng had seen the scar from where he had stabbed his brother split open, the wound deep and cruel. If he'd known, at the time, that Wei Wuxian didn't have a golden core he would never have stabbed him. If he'd known that one day a demon would repeat the action, and twist the knife in deeper –

And then there was wound that made Wen Qing's jaw tighten, the one that had required two hours of surgery to fully repair – the one a hair's width below the scar Wei Wuxian bore from giving his core to Jiang Cheng. The sight of it made Jiang Cheng want to scream.

Mercifully, Wen Qing said the damage to his new golden core was minimal. Initially, the demonic energy had caused a few hiccups, which was why the Nie healer had apparently told Wangji to stop passing him energy, but Wen Qing stabilised his core almost immediately. Since then, Wangji had twice been caught feeding spiritual energy to Wei Wuxian after Wen Qing told him he didn't have enough left to give.

Not that Jiang Cheng could judge. He'd been caught once, too, and the only reason he'd got away with it the first time was that he'd passed out halfway through, and Wen Qing had assumed he was just sleeping. Either that or she'd pretended not to notice.

He wished he could give more, but his own core was already depleted. When Wen Qing told him about the message from Wangji, he had flown them to Qinghe so fast he might have set a new record.

There was a soft knock on the door.

Jiang Cheng wasn't in the mood for company, and he let a warning into his voice. "Who is it?"

There was a slight pause, and then a familiar voice said, "It is Lan Xichen. If this is a bad time I can come back."

But Wangji's head had snapped up at the sound of his brother's voice, a look of raw hope in his eyes, and Jiang Cheng blinked, standing up. "Uh, come in?"

The door slid open, and Zewu Jun stepped inside, looking ever so slightly windswept. His brow was furrowed in concern, his hand gripped tightly around his flute.

"Xiongzhang," said Wangji, a wealth of raw emotion in the single word, relief the strongest of them all.

"Wangji," Lan Xichen replied, the concern on his face growing deeper as he looked at his brother, shifting into pain as he saw the bruises on Wangji's neck.

Nevertheless, his manners did not fail, and he bowed swiftly to Wen Qing and Jiang Cheng before he crossed the room to his brother's side. Wangji gazed up at him, as though expecting his brother to have all the answers in the world.

"I came as soon as I could," murmured Lan Xichen. "Da-ge wrote to me, and told me what happened... How is he?"

Wangji looked away from his brother, back down at Wei Wuxian, and Lan Xichen put a hand on his shoulder.

When Lan Wangji didn't speak, Wen Qing stepped up to the plate. "His physical injuries are healing at a steady pace. His spiritual energy levels are good. He woke for a few minutes, a short while ago." Here, Wen Qing's voice wavered. "He was very distressed."

"Understandably so," murmured Lan Xichen. "Wangji, how is your arm?"

Lan Wangji did not look at his brother. Instead, he kept his eyes fixed on Wei Wuxian.  
“Fine.”

Lan Xichen turned to Wen Qing. “Wen-guniang, could you please elaborate?”

Wen Qing inclined her head, eyeing Hanguang Jun a little warily, as though expecting him to protest. He didn’t even move. “The wound is healing, but not at a pace I’d expect from a cultivator. He has been pouring all the spiritual energy he can into Wei Wuxian, and has left none for himself. Wei Wuxian’s energy levels are stable. I’ve told Hanguang Jun he doesn’t need anymore, but...”

Lan Xichen closed his eyes for a moment, taking a deep breath. Then, he spoke in a tone that was somehow both gentle and reprimanding, a tone so much like A-Jie that it was almost strange. “Wangji...”

Lan Wangji said nothing. He simply stared down at Wei Wuxian’s sleeping face, as though none of the rest of them were there.

“Wangji,” Xichen said again, more firmly, and Wangji finally looked up at him. Jiang Cheng thought he looked almost defiant, and Lan Xichen raised his eyebrows. Wangji’s jaw tightened, and then Lan Xichen bowed his head a fraction, and Jiang Cheng suddenly got the impression that they were having a full, wordless conversation in front of him.

His own eyes flickered back to own brother. He looked very small, curled up against Wangji’s chest, and very young – there was a vulnerability on his face that Jiang Cheng hated, and a fragility in his slow, soft breaths.

Suddenly, Lan Wangji spoke. “I will not put him down. He did not wish to sleep. I will not let him go.”

“I’m not asking you to,” said Lan Xichen, his voice as soft as his brother’s was sharp.

“He did not wish to sleep,” Wangji repeated, his voice weakening on the final word.

“Alright, Wangji,” murmured Lan Xichen. “I understand. If you allow me to heal your arm, I can play Peace for him, if you would like.”

Jiang Cheng flinched. “He’s not dead,” he said, probably too sharply, though he couldn’t care about that. “You don’t need to settle his spirt, he’s not resentful.”

“I know, Jiang-zongzhu,” said Lan Xichen softly. “You are thinking of Rest. Peace is a different song – it can be very effective at deepening sleep and chasing away bad dreams. It is often used after traumatic events to help aid healing.”

Jiang Cheng felt his cheeks burn. “Oh... sorry.”

“Please don’t be,” said Lan Xichen sincerely. “I know you are only afraid for your brother. Wangji...?”

“Wei Ying first,” he said, and Lan Xichen shook his head.

“No. It will not take long to apply some energy to your wound. If his sleep seems disturbed, I will begin Peace at once.”

Lan Wangji gave a single nod, and Lan Xichen sat down on the edge of the bed, covering the bandage on his brother’s arm with his hand at once. A warm, blue glow emanated through the room as Lan Xichen passed energy to his brother.

After a few minutes, Wangji shuddered lightly, some of the tension easing from his shoulders, but at that moment Wei Wuxian began to whimper, his arm twitching, and then quiet, choking cries began to break from his throat. Wangji looked up desperately. “Xiongzhang!”

But Lan Xichen had already grabbed his flute, and he began to play almost before Wangji finished speaking. The tune was slow and light, almost dreamlike, and after a few bars Wei Wuxian’s cries weakened to whimpers, and then faded away entirely. Lan Xichen played on, and slowly Wei Wuxian’s face smoothed out, his frown fading away. Even with the music not aimed directly at him, Jiang Cheng felt himself relaxing, his posture becoming looser and lighter, his heart becoming less heavy.

He saw Wangji’s eyelids begin to droop, and his head begin to nod, his hair tickling Wei Wuxian’s face as he bobbed up and down, trying to stay awake.

“Xiongzhang,” he mumbled, but Lan Xichen did not pause his playing, watching his brother carefully. After another few minutes, Wangji’s eyes closed altogether, his head lolling forward, and Lan Xichen raised his eyebrows at Jiang Cheng, before looking meaningfully at the two sleeping husbands. Lan Wangji swayed, and Jiang Cheng understood, leaping up to catch his brother-in-law’s arm and ease him down so that he was lying on the bed, Wei Wuxian still tangled in his arms. Jiang Cheng shifted his brother’s face to make sure it was still lying on Wangji’s chest, and ran a hand over his hair. Wei Wuxian gave a soft, contented sigh, nuzzling closer to Wangji, who gave a little sigh of his own.

A few minutes later, the song came to a close, and Lan Xichen put down his flute with a sigh. “The spell should last a few hours, at least. Their sleep will be undisturbed until then.” He paused, his face calm but sad as he reached out and adjusted Wangji’s robes slightly so he would be more comfortable. “I don’t doubt they both need the rest...”

Wen Qing nodded. “Hanguang Jun has refused to sleep since they returned.”

“I know,” Lan Xichen murmured sadly, shaking his head a little. He sighed, glancing up at Jiang Cheng. “I’m sure if their positions had been reversed, and you were in my shoes, you would know too.” He shifted his position on the bed and then reached out, hovering his hand over Wangji’s throat. Once again, a soft blue light glowed from his palm as he passed spiritual energy into his brother. Slowly, the bruises around Wangji’s neck eased a little, turning green and yellow before Jiang Cheng’s eyes as Lan Xichen accelerated the healing process.

Eventually, Wangji sighed, shifting in his sleep, and Lan Xichen pulled his hand away. The bruises were still there, but now in lighter shades, seeming only a day or two away from disappearing entirely. The impressions of Wei Wuxian’s individual fingers were no longer visible, and Jiang Cheng breathed easier for it.

Lan Xichen blinked, eyes widening slightly as though he'd only just realised something, and then he smiled wearily at Jiang Cheng. "If you need to get some rest, Jiang-zongzhu, you may. I will sit with them."

"I appreciate the offer, Zewu Jun, but I'm not going anywhere," said Jiang Cheng.

"I wouldn't expect you to," said Lan Xichen. "I only meant that if you – either of you, for that matter," he added, looking at Wen Qing, "wished to meditate or sleep, then you may. I will keep watch, and wake you if anything changes."

"Oh," said Jiang Cheng, a little stupidly. To be honest, he could use the rest – the only sleep he'd got in the last forty-eight hours was when he passed out feeding energy to Wei Wuxian. "I'd appreciate that. Thank you."

"Of course," said Lan Xichen, inclining his head.

Jiang Cheng grabbed a pillow and laid down on the floor beside the bed, making sure that he could keep his brother in his sights as he did. As long as he could see his brother, things would be okay. If Lan Xichen could play Peace and keep Wei Wuxian's nightmares at bay, and Wen Qing could keep his physical wounds healing well, and Wangji could stay here and prove that he was definitely alive, then Jiang Cheng knew things would be okay. He wasn't sure exactly what his own role would be, but whatever it was he would play it wholeheartedly. He would do whatever it took.

With so powerful a group behind him, Wei Wuxian would recover. He would definitely recover.

He had to recover. Otherwise, Jiang Cheng was going to have to break his legs.

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! I hope you enjoyed, please let me know what you think if you have the chance! Until next time, please take care!

# Chapter 66

## Chapter Notes

Hi everyone! Thank you for your patience, and your lovely comments on the last chapter! I hope you enjoy this one :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It felt like he was floating, drifting up and down over gentle waves in a peaceful lake. Consciousness crept closer, and he realised that he was lying on someone, that his head was pillowed by a chest that still rose up and down with the slow, deep breaths of sleep. Wei Wuxian breathed in deeply, taking in the familiar scent that could only be Lan Zhan. He smiled, nestling closer to his husband, pressing his ear to Lan Zhan's chest to listen to the strong, steady beat of his heart.

Then he remembered the demon.

Wei Wuxian gave a sharp gasp, his eyes flying open, and he craned his neck up to see Lan Zhan's throat and his face and –

“It's alright,” said a gentle voice. “Wangji is fine. You are both safe. It's alright.”

A whimper rose in Wei Wuxian's throat, but he managed to trap it there as he saw Lan Zhan's sleeping face, peaceful and unharmed. The bruises were still there, and they still turned Wei Wuxian's stomach, but they looked much better than he remembered them being. With a shudder, Wei Wuxian tore his eyes away to search for the man who had spoken, finding him sitting beside the bed.

“Xiongzhong,” he breathed, his voice a little hoarse, and Lan Xichen smiled slightly at the address, “When did you get here?”

“Yesterday evening. You'd just fallen asleep again. It's the next day now – so three days since sword sacrifice hall. It's nearly five – I'm sure Wangji will wake soon,” he said, and Wei Wuxian studied his brother-in-law's face.

“Did you knock him out?” he asked suspiciously. “Or did he agree to go to sleep on his own?”

Lan Xichen gave a quiet laugh. “You know him well...” he said warmly. “I only directed the song of Peace towards him, too. That's all.”

Suddenly, the night without nightmares and the calm that still clung to him made sense, and Wei Wuxian gave a small smile. “Thank you, Zewu Jun.”

“There’s really no need for that,” said Lan Xichen. “I was happy to. How are you feeling? Are you in any pain?”

Yes. The answer to that was, unequivocally, yes, but Wei Wuxian could see Wen Qing behind Lan Xichen, leaning against the wall as though she had fallen asleep while mediating. Five was far too early for anyone other than a Lan to wake up. So Wei Wuxian gave a small smile and shook his head a little. “I’m okay.”

Lan Xichen studied him for a long moment, so long that Wei Wuxian felt a little awkward. Without a word, Lan Xichen rose, moving across the room and returning a second later with a small cup.

“Here,” he said kindly. “You needn’t get up, but can you lift your head?”

Wei Wuxian nodded, raising his head gingerly, careful not to tug the wounds on his back as he did so. Zewu Jun held the cup to his lips, and though Wei Wuxian’s nose curled up at the medicine’s familiar, unpleasant smell he drank it greedily. Then, he lowered his head again with a sigh.

“Thank you, Xiongzhang,” he said, and Lan Xichen gave a sad smile. Wei Wuxian glanced back up at Lan Zhan, still fast asleep beneath him, his eyes drawn irrevocably to his throat. Someone must have poured a lot of spiritual energy into the bruises if it really was the day after he’d last woke up. Yesterday, they’d been much, much worse. He swallowed, and then whispered, “I’m sorry.”

“What are you sorry for?” asked Lan Xichen softly, and Wei Wuxian felt his eyes burn. He closed them, tightly.

“I... I nearly killed him, Zewu Jun,” he whispered, his voice breaking. Only Lan Zhan’s heartbeat, strong and steady beneath his cheek, stopped him from sobbing like a baby. “It used my... my hands, and I wasn’t – I wasn’t strong enough to stop it... I couldn’t stop it, and-”

“Wei Wuxian,” said Lan Xichen sternly, so sternly that Wei Wuxian’s eyes opened in surprise. His brother-in-law was leaning forward, his face as sombre as death, and though his voice was still quiet there was an edge of steel Wei Wuxian had rarely heard in it before. “You did nothing wrong. I *know* that were the positions reversed, you would never wish for Wangji to feel guilty for attacking you, *especially* if he went so far as to break his own fingers to try and keep you safe. You know this, too. Do not carry this demon’s guilt on your own shoulders – it will hurt those of us who care for you as deeply as it will harm you. You have enough to heal from already, and you did everything that you could. You have *nothing* to apologise for.”

Wei Wuxian couldn’t breathe. He could feel tears falling from his eyes, soaking through Lan Zhan’s robes, and he swallowed. Lan Xichen leant forward a little further, reaching out to squeeze Wei Wuxian’s wrist with a small smile.

“You are only human, Wuxian,” he said, his voice now so gentle it reminded him of Yanli. “Yes, you are a cultivator, and an incredible one at that, but when the day ends, you’re only



human. You can only do so much. As long as you do everything within your power, then it is enough. So do not blame yourself for this. Do you understand me?"

It was another long moment before Wei Wuxian could speak, and to his own amazement, the words that left his lips were true, "I understand, Xiongzhong." The guilt still clung to him, the agony of knowing what his hands had done still burned, but Lan Xichen did not lie, and he certainly wouldn't break that to ease the feelings of one who had harmed his brother. It was the same thing that Jiang Cheng and Lan Zhan had told him yesterday but somehow... Somehow, he did believe it.

Lan Xichen's smile softened further, and he sat up, inclining his head. "Good. I know such things are easier said than done, so if you need assistance I am here."

"Thank you, Xiongzhong," Wei Wuxian said, unable to speak in more than a whisper.

Beneath him, Lan Zhan shifted, his arm rising up to curl around the small of Wei Wuxian's back as he sighed and opened his eyes. Blurry with sleep, they took a second to find Wei Wuxian, but when they did Lan Zhan smiled, shifting his other arm to stroke back Wei Wuxian's hair.

"Wei Ying," he mumbled sleepily, and Wei Wuxian couldn't help but smile.

"Morning, Lan Zhan," he said, and Lan Zhan smiled, running his thumb over Wei Wuxian's cheek.

Then, as quick as lightning, his smile disappeared. "Wei Ying – are you hurt?"

"What?" Wei Wuxian blinked, the sudden urgency taking him aback a little. "No? Well, I mean yes, but the medicine's starting to kick in again now."

"Everything is alright, Wangji," said Lan Xichen, and Lan Zhan jumped, his head turning quickly towards his brother. Adorably, Lan Zhan's cheeks grew a little pink, and Wei Wuxian realised quite suddenly (and most belatedly) that sprawled across his husband's chest with his legs hooked over Lan Zhan's really wasn't an appropriate position to lie in with Zewu Jun in the room. "Wuxian has just woken up, and he's already had another dose of medicine – as prescribed by Wen Qing last night before she went to sleep. Everything is fine."

Lan Zhan stared at his brother for a long moment, his face bordering on stony. Then, without a single word to Lan Xichen, he looked back at Wei Wuxian, concern in his eyes. "You are crying."

"Am I?" Wei Wuxian blinked, and Lan Zhan's thumb brushed over his cheek, wiping a tear away. "Oh... it's okay, Lan Zhan. We were just talking. It was... a good talk."

Lan Zhan studied his eyes a moment longer, and then said, "Mn." Then, finally, he addressed his brother. "Good morning, Xiongzhong."

"Good morning, Wangji," Lan Xichen returned, smiling fondly.

“Lan Zhan, did you really think that your brother was making me cry?” teased Wei Wuxian, and Lan Zhan’s arm shifted, hugging him a little closer.

“Not intentionally.”

Wei Wuxian gave a quiet laugh, glancing at Lan Xichen, who didn’t look even a little offended at this. Then, he looked back at Lan Zhan. His husband’s jaw shifted and clenched a little, the way it always did when he was stifling a yawn, and Wei Wuxian smiled fondly.

“We can go back to sleep if you like,” he murmured. “I’m sure Xiongzhong wouldn’t mind. It’s barely five.”

Lan Zhan started to shake his head, and then looked down at Wei Wuxian. “Do you wish to go back to sleep?”

Wei Wuxian considered for a moment, and then shook his head. “I’m awake, now.”

Lan Zhan nodded, and then began to move, sitting up in bed.

Wei Wuxian whined in protest. “No, that’s not – Lan *Zhan*...”

Lan Xichen gave a soft laugh, and Lan Zhan said nothing. He leant over, hooking his arms under Wei Wuxian’s chest and legs. Immeasurably gently, he pulled Wei Wuxian upright, helping him support himself with several pillows to make sure he wasn’t putting too much strain on any of his wounds. Lan Zhan also made sure that Wei Wuxian was tucked snugly against his side, and he kept his arm around Wei Wuxian’s shoulders, holding him close.

“Is this less inappropriate?” he teased, and Lan Zhan nodded once, and then he brushed his lips against Wei Wuxian’s cheek. Normally, Wei Wuxian would chase his lips and deepen the kiss, but sitting so close was already far more overt physical affection than his husband usually displayed in Lan Xichen’s presence, and he didn’t want to push his luck. Of course, in front of his own brother, Wei Wuxian enjoyed kissing Lan Zhan as passionately as he could and hearing Jiang Cheng’s outraged squawking. Thinking of his brother... “Where’s Jiang Cheng?” he asked Zewu Jun. “I’m surprised you were able to chase him out of here.”

Lan Xichen smiled, nodding towards the other side of the bed. “I did not try to, and I do not think I would have been successful if I had.”

Wei Wuxian looked over his shoulder, wincing as the movement tugged the wounds on his back. Then, he gave a little smile of his own. Jiang Cheng was fast asleep on the floor, one hand entwined in his own hair, looking very young.

“Ah,” he said. “In that case I’m not surprised at all.”

Wei Wuxian didn’t know whether it was a lingering affect of the music Peace, the relief of a good night’s sleep, or even simply Lan Xichen’s calm, reassuring presence, but the morning passed in a wonderful, serene way. Even when Wen Qing woke up and started poking and prodding at Wei Wuxian’s wounds, and when Jiang Cheng woke up and scolded Wei Wuxian

for shamelessly lounging all over Lan Zhan, Wei Wuxian felt safe and calm and happy, more so than he could have imagined the day before.

As afternoon crept nearer, Lan Xichen excused himself to go and speak with Nie Mingjue and see to lunch. Just minutes after he left, there was the sound of footsteps running towards them, growing louder by the second, and then the door burst open. Nie Huaisang flew into the room, pink-cheeked and wide eyed, and when he saw Wei Wuxian he beamed, relief and joy spreading across his face.

“Wei-xiong! Er-ge said you were awake!” He ran across the room and skidded to a halt beside the bed, hovering there. “Thank god! How are you feeling? Do you need anything? How are you?!”

Wei Wuxian laughed. “I’m okay, Nie-xiong. A little sore, a little scarred, but when aren’t I?” At once Lan Zhan stiffened beside him, and Jiang Cheng’s face fell into a scowl. Wei Wuxian rolled his eyes at his brother, and slipped his hand into his husband’s. “I’m kidding, I’m kidding. How’s your arm, Nie-xiong?”

“Sore,” pouted Nie Huaisang at once, pushing up his sleeve to show a fully bandaged arm. “I’m never going night hunting ever again. But that’s not important,” he said suddenly, much to Wei Wuxian’s surprise. Then, he knelt down, and kowtowed towards Wei Wuxian.

“Nie-xiong!” Wei Wuxian yelped. “What are you doing?”

Huaisang rose, but only halfway, remaining on his knees, bringing his arms in front of him to continue the bow. “Thank you, Wei-xiong,” he said, his voice quiet and tremulous and so sincere it hardly sounded like his own. “The debt I owe you isn’t one I can ever repay, but I’ll try.”

“What?! No, no, there’s no debt-” But Lan Zhan squeezed Wei Wuxian’s hand, silencing him, and Huaisang’s face grew more solemn.

“I owe you the life of my brother,” he said sombrely, and Wei Wuxian’s eyes flickered automatically towards Jiang Cheng for a moment. “And if not my own life, the life of whoever would’ve taken the role of zongzhu after I did. I owe you for the freedom of my entire clan.” He took a shuddering breath, and then gave a weak smile. “Thank you, Wei-xiong. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” said Wei Wuxian, still panicking slightly. “Please stop bowing!”

Nie Huaisang gave a small smile, finally lowering his arms and settling to sit beside Jiang Cheng rather than bow. “I hope you know,” he said, sounding a little like he was going to burst into tears, “that as soon as you’re fully healed we’re going to have a massive banquet to celebrate. Lots of alcohol.”

Wei Wuxian laughed. “*That* is something you can owe me,” he said, nodding, and Huaisang beamed, though his eyes were full of tears.

“Truly, Wei-xiong,” he said. “Qinghe Nie is in your debt, and I don’t know if we’ll ever be able to repay it.”

“I don’t want anyone to be in my debt!” Wei Wuxian protested. “I don’t want anything in return, I-”

“I know that,” said Huaisang. “But that doesn’t mean you don’t deserve it.”

“But –”

There was a knock on the doorframe – given that Huaisang had left the door itself wide open – and then Lan Xichen poked his head inside. “May we come in?”

“Of course,” said Wei Wuxian, and Lan Xichen re-entered, Nie Mingjue at his side.

Then, to Wei Wuxian’s horror, Nie Mingjue knelt beside his brother, and just like Huaisang kowtowed towards Wei Wuxian. Wei Wuxian opened his mouth, but Lan Zhan squeezed his hand again. He felt his cheeks burn red and tried to hold his tongue, but when Nie Mingjue bowed a third time he couldn’t take it anymore.

“Chifeng Zun, please, there’s no need,” he said, but when Nie Mingjue rose he pierced Wei Wuxian with a look that shut him up at once.

It was a look both sharp and caring, and infinitely grateful. “Wei Wuxian,” he said, “I have known since the age of ten that I would be lucky to reach forty years old. I have known for months that in another life, my sworn brother used this curse to murder me. But you have removed the axe that has been hanging over my head since birth, and I will never be able to thank you enough for it. You will forever have the gratitude and devotion of Qinghe Nie, and if there is ever anything that we can do to ease this debt, please let it be known to us. This gratitude of course extends to Wangji, too, but you... you showed us a path where we thought none could exist. Thank you.”

Wei Wuxian felt a lump rise in his throat, and he bit back the urge to say it was nothing. If he was in Nie Mingjue’s shoes, or even worse, in Huaisang’s... He swallowed, and then held his arms out in front of him, doing as best he could to bow back without aggravating his wounds.

“It was my honour to do what I could to help my friends,” he said. “Assuming it worked? You – Lan Zhan said yesterday-”

“It worked,” said Nie Mingjue, with a smile brighter than Wei Wuxian had ever imagined the man capable of. “As hard as it is to believe, as... You did it, Wei Wuxian. Thank you.”

“Technically, Huaisang did it,” Wei Wuxian pointed out, but Huaisang scoffed.

“Wei-xiong, every man on this earth could tell you I would have *no* idea how to do any of that if I hadn’t seen you do it first. Several times in practice.”

“Thank you, Wei Wuxian,” said Nie Mingjue again. “Thank you.”

In the end, they stayed in Qinghe for another week, and quite frankly, Wei Wuxian found it more than a little overwhelming. Since the trial into Lanling Jin, the Yiling Patriarch's pitch-black reputation had become murky and grey, with many throughout the lands seeming reluctant to discard the villainous image he'd held for so long. Wei Wuxian hadn't let it bother him, since he couldn't blame them for being wary.

Now, however... Every Nie disciple senior enough to know about the sabre spirits knew what had happened in the sword sacrifice hall, and even the rest of Qinghe – disciples and common folk alike – knew that Wei Wuxian had performed a great service to Qinghe Nie, and in doing so saved the lives not only of Nie Mingjue and Nie Huaisang, but likely the entire clan. Wei Wuxian wasn't sure exactly what everyone thought had happened, but he'd been treated like a hero all week, with disciples bowing deeper than they needed to and offering thanks and smiles freely. When he'd ventured out into the market his arms had swiftly become full of food and trinkets and clothes pressed on him by friendly merchants, and children had run up to get a glance at the 'great hero.' Hovering protectively at his shoulder, Jiang Cheng complained loudly that this would all go to Wei Wuxian's head, and Lan Zhan shot disapproving glares at Jiang Cheng every time he did, and Wei Wuxian said nothing.

He was still reeling from that way that people now called out to the Yiling Patriarch with cheerful, grateful voices, lauding the title like an honorific rather than a curse.

However, a week was plenty of time for Wei Wuxian's wounds to heal almost completely—the stab wound in his abdomen still ached, and Wen Qing had threatened him under pain of needles not to do any rigorous exercise until she told him so, but with her care and the (frankly excessive) amounts of spiritual energy poured into him by Lan Zhan and Jiang Cheng, he was more or less well.

By then, the bruises had also disappeared entirely from around Lan Zhan's neck. If they hadn't, Wei Wuxian would have insisted waiting longer in the Unclean Realm. He did *not* need Sizhui or A-Yuan seeing those marks around their Baba's neck. Ever.

To Wei Wuxian's delight, by pure coincidence their sons were the first people he spotted as they descended into the courtyard of Lotus Pier. They were walking towards the main hall hand in hand, A-Yuan chatting animatedly about something, and Sizhui was smiling and nodding, and then he looked up, and his eyes widened.

"You're home!"

A-Yuan blinked, and then followed Sizhui's gaze. With a squeal of delight, A-Yuan shot forward, an enormous grin on his face as he held out his arms.

"A-Die, Baba, A-Die, Baba!"

Wei Wuxian laughed, scooping down to snatch A-Yuan off the floor and spin him around, hugging him tight. "Hello, little radish! Did you miss us?"

"So much!" A-Yuan squeaked, hugging his arms so tightly around Wei Wuxian it actually hurt a little. Lan Zhan stepped forward, holding his arms out for A-Yuan. Their son leapt

gladly into his Baba's arms, while Lan Zhan shot Wei Wuxian a Look.

"No rigorous exercise," he scolded.

Wei Wuxian rolled his eyes. "You mean to tell me I can't hug our son now, Lan Zhan?" A hand smacked the back of his head, and he pouted. "Ow! Wen Qing!"

"Of course you can hug your son," she said. "But you don't need to spin him around on the spot to hug him."

Wei Wuxian had already stopped listening, because Sizhui was frozen a few paces away, a look of worry on his face as his eyes flickered between Wen Qing, Lan Zhan, and Wei Wuxian. Sizhui was old enough to have read Jiang Cheng's letters back to Lotus Pier himself, old enough to know that Wei Wuxian was injured. He was old enough to guess from a recovery time of a week how bad things could have been.

He was young enough that his fear still showed on his face.

"And hello to my big radish!" Wei Wuxian declared happily, striding forward and pulling Sizhui into his arms. At once, his son hugged him tightly, and Wei Wuxian gave a sad smile, leaning down to whisper in his son's ear. "I'm alright, A-Zhui. All healed. It's alright now."

Sizhui shuddered, but then he nodded, squeezing tighter for a moment. There was a gleeful shout, and Wei Wuxian looked up to see Zizhen, Jingyi and Jinling running towards him, relief and joy on their faces.

Wei Wuxian froze, pain flaring sharp in his leg as his eyes caught on the dog at Jinling's side. He could feel a scream building in his throat, feel his entire body going stiff as the wound the demon had reopened, the wound Wen Qing had healed, *throbbed* with pain and –

"Xiao Ying!" said Jinling quickly, and the dog froze in its tracks. Even as the three boys continued forward, the dog took several steps back, and then laid down, covering her nose with her paws.

"Xian-gege," Sizhui murmured, his arms still around Wei Wuxian, concern carved deep on his face, and Lan Zhan put a hand on his shoulder.

"I'm okay," Wei Wuxian said, his voice coming out a little strangled. Zizhen, Jingyi and Jinling slowed down, the worry on their faces echoing Sizhui's, but the dog stayed where it was, making no sign of moving, and so Wei Wuxian let out a slow breath, and smiled. "I'm okay," he said again, more strongly. "How are you all?"

"Fine," said Jinling quickly, looking over his shoulder. "Xiao Ying, go to my room, good girl!"

The puppy leapt to its feet and, tail wagging, turned and scampered away. Wei Wuxian watched it go, narrowing his eyes. "I *still* can't believe you named that thing Xiao Ying. Ungrateful, unfilial child."

“Little Cherry is a perfectly acceptable name for a dog,” said Jinling, tilting his chin up the way he always did when they had this argument. “The fact that it’s the same pronunciation is entirely coincidental.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Wei Wuxian muttered, reaching out and dragging his brat of a nephew into a headlock, ruffling his hair.

“Everything went okay, didn’t it?” said Zizhen, unable to quite hide the worry from his face. Meanwhile, Jiang Cheng freed Jinling from Wei Wuxian’s grip so he could ruffle the boy’s hair himself, and Wei Wuxian took the opportunity to hug Zizhen instead.

“It went perfectly,” said Wei Wuxian proudly.

“Wei Wuxian,” growled Jiang Cheng, as Wen Qing fixed him with a gaze as sharp as a needle, and Lan Zhan gave him yet another Look.

“Well, it could have gone worse,” Wei Wuxian acquiesced, still hugging Zizhen. “But if what you’re asking is ‘is it over,’ then yes, it is. It’s over now.” He felt Zizhen slump in relief, and smiled, pulling away. He embraced Jingyi, too, so he wouldn’t be left out, and then Wei Wuxian stood back, observing his time-travellers with a wry smile. “You know, in terms of changing the future, you guys really didn’t do too badly.”

All four boys beamed.

## Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed this chapter! Please do let me know what you thought if you have the chance to :D After this, we've only got the epilogue left - it should be up in the next few days :) Bittersweet, but it's been a hell of a ride, and I hope you've enjoyed it as much as I have! Until next time, please take care!

# Chapter 67

## Chapter Notes

Hi there! Thank you for your lovely response to the last chapter. We've made it to the epilogue, and I really hope you enjoy it! Thank you for coming along on this wild ride.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Eight months to the day after he landed in the past, Lan Sizhui sat on the end of a quiet pier, meditating as the dawn broke over a lake full of waking lotus flowers. As the petals opened to greet the morning sun a gentle breeze stirred the air, the scent of the flowers surrounding Sizhui, and he breathed in deeply. Summer was nearing its end.

Soon, he, Jingyi, Jinling and Zizhen would return to Gusu to attend this year's lectures. It would be strange – Sizhui, Jingyi and Zizhen had all already completed the lectures, and they would likely be a little older than most of their fellow classmates, but if they recognised any of these classmates, it would be as people who'd once been their seniors. Jinling had never completed the lectures before, and he got anxious when people brought them up, but for all it promised to be odd, Sizhui was not worried. His fathers planned to be at Gusu for much of the duration of the lectures. There was no need to worry about anything.

After that, Sizhui was not sure what would happen. He and Jingyi may be expected to stay at Cloud Recesses for some time. At that point, he may even wish to. After all, Cloud Recesses was also home. It seemed likely that for the rest of his life, or at least for the foreseeable future, Sizhui would be splitting time between Gusu and Lotus Pier.

He didn't know how he had become so lucky.

Jinling would be leaving Lotus Pier sooner than the rest of them would. A week ago, word had arrived from Lanling that Jin Zixuan believed it was now safe enough for his family to return to Jinlintai. Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng had, of course, refused to believe this without seeing it for themselves, and had flown to Jinlintai to do a full inspection of the place. When they returned, Wei Wuxian glumly told Jiang Yanli that it was perfectly safe. So, for the foreseeable future, Jinling planned to pass his time very similarly to the way he had before they returned to the past – spending half the year in Lotus Pier, and the other half in Jinlintai.

"You don't have to feel torn, Jinling," Wei Wuxian had assured him one night at dinner, when Jinling was worrying again about whether or not it would work. "You can choose both of us."

However, as happy as Jinling was with the compromise, A-Yuan had not taken the news well. He had begrudgingly accepted that Bobo, Gufu, Nie-bobo, and Nie-shushu, all lived away from Lotus Pier, but the concept of Li-gugu being more than a ten-minute walk away had him



wailing for a solid five minutes. It didn't seem to matter that Gufu really should have his wife and children join him, or that Yanli promised to visit, and promised that he could visit her. Clutching at her skirts, A-Yuan begged through sobs to know why Gufu couldn't come *here*, why they couldn't all be together *here*.

It didn't help that Wei Wuxian was equally upset at the thought of Yanli moving away.

"Why can't the stupid Peacock move here and give that rotten old tower to one of his more tolerable relatives?" he'd grumbled, more than once.

"Why can't you just invent a better portal talisman that takes less energy to use so that we can come back more easily?" retorted Jinling. "Su She was able to take Wen Qing and Xuanyu through one without completely draining their energy levels, so you should be able to figure out a better one."

This had sent Wei Wuxian into a craze of mad inventing which had lasted almost three days. At that point he emerged from a workshop that smelt alarmingly like iron with soot on his face and a smug grin, showing off a talisman that required a great deal of power to set, but could carry as many people as required at any given time.

"So the caster will be exhausted, but you and the kids can come through at any time without it affecting your energy at all!" said Wei Wuxian enthusiastically to his sister, who had shaken her head and smiled, poking Wei Wuxian's nose.

"You must visit me too, Xianxian," she'd chided. "We won't be able to visit for a month or so while we get A-Ling, Xuanyu, and the girls settled."

With Jin Zixuan recognising Mo Xuanyu as his brother, it made sense for the young boy and his mother to move to Jinlintai, too. The decision had rested firmly on Mo Nianzhen's shoulders, though she had been clearly swayed by Xuanyu's clear desire to stay with his Dage. This time, Sizhui knew in his heart that moving to Jinlintai would make Mo Xuanyu, and not break him.

Apparently, Jin-furen had had some objections when she heard her son intended to bring one of Jin Guangshan's former mistresses into their household, but Jin Zixuan did not care. He had made it very clear that Xuanyu was his brother, and would be treated as such, and that Mo Nianzhen would be respected at his mother.

As for A-Xing and A-Xia, no one had been surprised by Jin Zixuan and Jiang Yanli announcing their intention to formally adopt them, except perhaps the two girls themselves. Jinling had taken to big brotherhood surprisingly well, though he'd stumbled here and there. More than once, he'd asked Zizhen for advice, but Sizhui almost wished that he wouldn't. Every time he reassured Jinling that it was normal to bicker with siblings, or advised him how to deal with the girls getting upset, Zizhen's face would get a little pinched. Sizhui knew that Zizhen missed his own siblings, and Sizhui hoped fiercely that one day he would be reunited with them, but it would be a day long coming, if it came at all.

Sizhui took a deep breath, grounding himself. Today was not a day to dwell on sad things. It was the final day before Jinling and the others left for Jinlintai. There was a great feast

planned for the evening, and more importantly, before that, there was another ceremony planned.

At noon, Sizhui, Jingyi, Zizhen and Jinling would officially swear brotherhood.

The sound of pattering feet hurrying towards him brought a small smile to his lips, and a moment later a little body crashed into his back, wrapping its little arms around him.

“Zhui-gege!”

“Good morning, A-Yuan,” Sizhui said with a smile, twisting around to return the little boy’s hug. At once, A-Yuan plopped down into his lap, smiling up at him.

“A-Die says its breakfast time,” he said. “You need to come in now.”

Sizhui blinked, a little surprised. If it was breakfast time, he’d been out here meditating for nearly two and a half hours. He shook his head a little and smiled, looking down at A-Yuan. “Very well. But how am I supposed to go in if you’re in my lap?”

“I don’t know,” said A-Yuan innocently.

“Hm,” said Sizhui thoughtfully, feigning ignorance of what his little brother wanted. “Perhaps... I should tip you into the lake!”

He rocked forwards, grabbing A-Yuan under the arms and swinging him out over the lake. A-Yuan squealed, kicking his feet and forcing out words between shrieks of laughter.

“No, no, Zhui-gege, no!”

Sizhui held A-Yuan upside down, making him laugh so hard his little cheeks went red, bobbing him up and down so his hair almost touched the surface of the water. Then, he pulled him back in and onto his hip, standing up. Breathless with giggles, A-Yuan grabbed Sizhui’s robes and shook his head.

“No, gege,” he managed to wheeze, and Sizhui grinned, poking his nose.

“Alright then. I suppose it is a little early for swimming.”

They made their way to the dining hall, and found Wei Wuxian waiting outside with Rulan on his hip. The baby was playing with Wei Wuxian’s hair and babbling cheerful nonsense at him, and he gave a happy little squeal as A-Yuan and Sizhui approached.

“I found him, A-Die!” called A-Yuan, and Wei Wuxian beamed.

“Good job!” he praised. “Morning, A-Zhui. I thought you were going to be out there all day.”

“Sorry, Xian-gege, I was a little distracted.”

Wei Wuxian smiled, shifting Rulan on his hip. For a while after Qinghe, both of Sizhui’s fathers had been a little withdrawn, and Wei Wuxian had been particularly uneasy around

Xiao Ying, to the point where Sizhui was concerned that it would be too much, and that they would have to send the dog away.

However, about two weeks after they got back, Sizhui and Wei Wuxian had been shopping in Lotus Cove when a stray dog had wandered a little too close. Wei Wuxian had barely even started to scream when Xiao Ying shot out of nowhere, growling fiercely and chasing it away. She was still a puppy, and less than three times the larger dog's size, but she snarled and snapped at the creature until it fled in a panic. Then, her hackles still raised, she came back, trotting a wide circle around Sizhui and Wei Wuxian. Looking very proud of herself, Xiao Ying had then sat down with her tail wagging.

"D-did, did she just ch-chase the other dog away?" Wei Wuxian had asked, looking bewildered, and Sizhui nodded.

"Jinling's taught her that dogs can't come near you," Sizhui guessed. "The other dog was breaking the rules."

"Huh," Wei Wuxian had breathed, his hand gripping Sizhui's arm. "Huh..."

From that day on it was clear that Xiao Ying would be welcome in Lotus Pier whenever Jinling was there, and to Sizhui's relief it wasn't too long after that that the shadows of whatever happened in Qinghe faded completely from his father's face.

"Sizhui?"

Sizhui blinked, and Wei Wuxian laughed.

"I can see you're still distracted," he said, reaching out and poking Sizhui's forehead ribbon. "Come on, let's get some food into you."

After breakfast, Sizhui, Jingyi, Jinling and Zizhen were summoned to the Sword Hall. Jiang Cheng was sitting in the Lotus Throne, grinning widely. On his right side stood Wei Wuxian and Hanguang Jun, who was now carrying A-Yuan, along with Wen Ning, Wen Qing, and Popo, and on the left of the throne were Jiang Yanli and Jin Zixuan, Rulan cradled in his father's arms.

There was a large, ornate box on the ground, and to Sizhui's surprise, standing in front of it were Lu Meilin and Lan Liqin.

"I'm sorry that this has taken so long," said Lan Liqin, smiling at them all warmly. "I hoped to be finished sooner, but it was necessary to ensure that all the details were perfect."

"What details?" asked Jinling, and Lan Liqin's eyes sparkled.

"We have agreed to go in age order," he said, nodding towards Jingyi. "Please step forward, Jingyi."

Jingyi blinked, and then stepped forward. Lan Liqin smiled at him. "Though you are by blood my grandson, by law you are my son – either way it is an honour to count you among my family." Jingyi's cheeks grew pink as his grandfather spoke, even as a grin spread across his

face, and he bowed. Lan Liqin bowed back, and then Lu Meilin opened the box. The lid blocked Sizhui and his companions from seeing what was inside, but then Lan Liqin swept down to take something out of it, and at once Sizhui understood. "It is my honour to give you this."

He bowed, holding out a sheathed sword, and Sizhui heard Jingyi's breath catch in his throat.

The sword was beautiful. Its sheath was ice blue, encircled with bands of metal that bore intricate, geometric patterns of stunning craftsmanship, and near its hilt Sizhui could see the same cloud emblem as members of the inner Lan family wore on their headbands. With a trembling hand, Jingyi pulled the sword from its sheath, and even an untrained eye would be able to tell in an instant that it was truly a first-class weapon, and a powerful one at that.

Lan Liqin was the greatest weapon-smith among Gusu Lan, after all.

After a long moment, Jingyi swallowed, and then spoke. "What's... what's its name?"

"That is your decision," said Lan Liqin warmly. "One you can take your time in making, if you wish."

Jingyi blinked furiously as though trying to hold back tears, and he nodded quickly. It would take him time, Sizhui knew that. He had taken nearly two weeks to name his sword when they first received them before.

"Thank you," Jingyi said, his voice choked as he bowed low. "Thank you, Yeye."

"You are very welcome," said Lan Liqin, returning the bow with a smile. Then, he nodded his head and Jingyi stepped back into line. Sizhui could practically feel him trembling, could feel anticipation of his own tempt his heart to beat faster as Lan Liqin looked at him. "Sizhui, please stand forward."

Sizhui took a step forward, his eyes flickering to his fathers for a moment. Wei Wuxian was beaming, and Hanguang Jun was smiling so proudly Sizhui could hardly bear to look. He turned his attention back to Lan Liqin.

"Though we share no blood, it is my privilege to acknowledge you as my son," Lan Liqin said, reaching into the box once more. "And it is my honour to give you this."

Sizhui couldn't breathe as Lan Liqin carefully placed the sword into his outstretched hands. The craftsmanship was just as beautiful as Jingyi's, but the designs were less sharp and angular, and the shade of the sheath was a little closer to white than blue. However, what made Sizhui's heart stop beating was the images carved into the hilt. On one side, just like Jingyi's, there was the cloud motif of Gusu Lan. But on the other...

On the other, there was a lotus flower, its innermost petal looking almost like a little flame.

Breathlessly, Sizhui put a hand on the hilt, instantly feeling a surge of power and warmth as the spirit of the sword greeted him. In his previous life, his sword had been commissioned by Hanguang Jun, and was without a doubt a first-class blade. Without even pulling this sword

from the sheath, he could tell it was stronger. When he did draw the sword, he saw a sigil engraved at the top of the blade, encircled by red and silver lines that looked almost like ribbons.

Sizhui looked at his fathers, and then back at his sword. He could feel tears in his eyes, on his cheeks, and he could hardly choke out his thanks around the lump in his throat. He bowed, so deeply that Lan Liqin laughed and guided him back up.

“You’re welcome,” he said sincerely, and then he nodded. Sizhui fell back into line, wiping the tears from his cheeks and sliding the sword back into his sheath. As he did, Lan Liqin called, “Zizhen, please step forward.” Looking a little uncertain, Zizhen obeyed, and Lan Liqin nodded at him. “It is a blessing far greater than any I can give for my sons to have a friend as true as you. Your loyalty, courage, and sacrifice are exceptional, and you will always be welcome in our home. It is my honour to present you this blade.”

A soft gasp left Zizhen’s lips as Lan Liqin lifted the third sword from the box. Its sheath was a rich purple, only a shade paler than Jiang Cheng’s, and dark silver curled around it in the shape of a flowering vine, exquisitely carved. Embedded in either side of its hilt were two gems – one rich red, the other deep blue. They were a shade off from the original colours of Baling Ouyang, but when he saw them Zizhen smiled so brightly with eyes so full of tears that Sizhui nearly started crying again himself.

When he drew the blade, Zizhen gave another small gasp, and looked up at Lan Liqin. “Lan-qianbei, are... are you sure this isn’t too much?”

Lan Liqin smiled. “I can assure you, it is not. This blade is no more than you deserve.”

With tears in his eyes, Zizhen finally sheathed the sword, and then he bowed, still mumbling “Thank you!” even as he stepped back into the line.

“Last, but certainly not least, Jinling, please step forward,” said Lan Liqin, and Jinling did so, excitement and anticipation and nervousness written all over his face. “I am also very grateful that my sons have you by their side. You are strong and brave, and I know the world can expect great things from you. It is, therefore, my honour to present you this.”

With that, Lan Liqin pulled the final blade from the box. Its sheath was almost identical in colour to Zizhen’s, though the metallic patterns around it were gold, rather than silver. The shape of its hilt was clearly designed to be near identical to Suihua, and it was adorned with lotus flowers. Except, when Sizhui looked closer, he realised some were not lotus flowers at all – they were, unmistakeably, peonies.

And, of course, when he drew it, it was just as powerful as the others.

“Thank you, Lan-qianbei,” Jinling stuttered, his eyes alight with awe. “Thank you, thank you!”

“You’re very welcome,” laughed Lan Liqin. “You’re all very welcome!”

“You didn’t think we’d let you use borrowed swords forever, did you?” Jiang Cheng teased, standing up. “Come on, now, let me see up close!”

With that, everyone gathered around to inspect the new blades. Sizhui squashed himself between his fathers, hugging them both tightly before pulling away to let them look at the sword. A hundred names ran through his head for it, but he was too emotional to choose right now.

After a few minutes, Rulan started babbling for attention, and Wei Wuxian demanded to hold the baby again.

“It’s my turn,” said Jiang Cheng curtly, intercepting Rulan as Yanli made to pass him to Wei Wuxian. Rulan gurgled, nestling against Jiang Cheng with a happy little cooing sound. “I’m not going to see him, either.”

“You traitor, Rulan,” scolded Wei Wuxian, wagging his finger at the baby. “Being so happy with your second rate Jiujiu!”

“Second rate? Whose second rate?” snapped Jiang Cheng, turning his body as if to shield the baby from Wei Wuxian.

“Boys,” Jiang Yanli said warningly, though she was smiling. Little Rulan looked very smug, as though he was aware of the drama he was causing.

“Baba, Baba,” said A-Yuan, and Hanguang Jun looked down at him.

“Mn?”

“Can we have a baby?”

Sizhui nearly choked, looking quickly at his younger self as Hanguang Jun blinked. Wei Wuxian stepped over quickly.

“A baby?” he asked. “Why do you want a baby?”

A-Yuan’s lower lip stuck out. “Because, because Gugu and my baby have to go away. I like having a baby, I help lots with the baby, don’t I Li-gugu? But you’re just taking him – he has to go away. I love all of my gege, but I like not being the littlest one. I like having a baby.”

To Sizhui’s surprise, there was a sparkle in Wei Wuxian’s eyes as he smiled at Hanguang Jun, a soft, longing smile Sizhui barely knew.

“I don’t know, A-Yuan,” Wei Wuxian said slowly, keeping eye contact with his husband the whole time. “You really want a little didi or meimei?”

“Mn,” said A-Yuan, nodding.

“We already have a Big Radish and a Little Radish and a Zizhen Radish – you think we need a Tiny Radish, too?” Wei Wuxian pressed, looking back at A-Yuan, who nodded again.

“Babies do not come out of nowhere, A-Yuan,” said Hanguang Jun quietly, looking intently at Wei Wuxian. “But maybe, soon...”

Wei Wuxian smiled, staring at Hanguang Jun. “Maybe soon.”

A small flutter of excitement flickered in Sizhui’s stomach. The idea of having another baby brother or sister was a wonderful one – his fathers were wonderful parents, and watching them dote on A-Yuan together never failed to warm Sizhui’s heart. To have another baby in their lives...

“I think it’s a wonderful idea,” he said softly, and Wei Wuxian beamed, reaching out and wrapping his arm around Sizhui’s shoulders.

A few short hours later, they all reconvened in one of the pavilions that looked over the lake. This time they were joined by A-Xing, A-Xia, and Xuanyu and his mother, along with a good number of the Wen and the Jiang. Sizhui couldn’t help but be nervous, but he also couldn’t keep from smiling, standing once again in a line with Jingyi, and Zizhen, and Jinling.

As A-Yuan had pointed out more than once, the four boys had been brothers for some time now, but the ceremony would make it official, and undeniable, and irrevocable. For Sizhui, it was hard not to smile through the vows, and the wine, and every last second of it.

Together, the four boys bowed, and it was impossible not to think of how they had reached here. Sizhui would never forget the horrors that had brought them here. He would never forget the Guanyin Temple, or Jin Guangyao, or the horrors they had suffered through since. But just as he would never forget them, he would never rue them, either. Because now he stood here. Now, what was once the past seemed like the brightest of futures.

Together, they had made it.

Together, they rose.

## Chapter End Notes

I really hope that you enjoyed that chapter, and that you enjoyed this mammoth story. I'm really proud of it, and I'm so, so glad that you have all been along for the ride! A HUGE thanks goes to my Beta, updatebug, who has been there every step of the way - I love you, and you are the best :D

In regards to this fic, there's going to be a couple of one-shot spin offs in the series (mainly crack, to be honest) about what would have happened if the juniors landed in different points in the timeline, so stay tuned for those!

I'm taking part in the MXTX Big Bang this year, so I'm working on that project next and can't say anything about it right now, but I can promise I've another long fic coming by winter! In the meantime, if the writing of the Big Bang goes well I might start posting a

shorter story between now and then, but life is a little busy right now so we will see. If I don't post for a while, don't worry - I'm not abandoning this wonderful fandom any time soon.

Thank you so, so much for reading. Until I next see you, please take care <3



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